# Time of war, time of revolt among indigenous peoples of Cambodia

*The first territory controlled by the Khmer Rouge in Ratanakiri (1967-1971)*

Frédéric BOURDIER

Preface by Ben KIERNAN

Prologue by Mathieu GUÉRIN

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Augmented revised version made by Frédéric BOURDIER (August 2023)

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*All photos taken by the author Frédéric Bourdier, except photo 3 kindly offered by Rocham Tveng (Andong Meas district) in 2016.*

*Maps designed by Frédéric Bourdier and Téphanie Sieng (UMR "DEVSOC", IRD & Paris 1 Panthéon - Sorbonne)*

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*To Pan Van Day*

Table of contents

Preface by Ben Kiernan 07
Prologue by Mathieu Guérin 11
Acknowledgments 14
Map 1: Ratanakiri Province in Cambodia 17
Map 2: Ratanakiri during Khmer Rouge presence (1967-1971) 18
Map 3: Viêt Nam War and Main Hô Chi Minh Trail (1969-1975) 19
Photo captions (List of 13 photos) 20
Foreword 22
Note on sources 29
Introduction 33
Chapter 1: A village in the forest 41
The warrior clan 41
To be born as a Jarai 44
Early social life 48
Chapter 2: The new smells 66
First contacts and warning signs of conflict 67
Earliest setbacks 70
The revolts of the Highlanders reinforced by the Viet Minh 80
The Viet Minh presence 87
Thunder in the sky 92
Chapter 3: From an ally to another 98
The short term alliance between Viet Minh and Khmer Rouge 99
The arrival of Khmer Rouge intellectuals 105
The rapprochement between Pol Pot and Phi Phuon 116
“Make the revolution” yourself 121
Chapter 4: Behind the scenes 124
Degradation of the local situation 125
Against the Regime: internal resistance and escape 136
The return of the Vietnamese troops 141
Chapter 5: Homecoming 143
Missing in action 143

Return 144
The last trip 149
Epilogue 150
An inspiration coming from the indigenous peoples? 150
Glimpses s of the Past 157
Back to beginning 160
Annex: Elements of Genealogy of Phi Phuon's brother T'veng 163
Chronology 174
Sources related to the chronology 179
Glossary 180
Photos 185

# PREFACE

Ben Kiernan

In Phnom Penh in 2018, the UN-sponsored Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC) concluded that two genocides had occurred during the rule of Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge regime, from 1975 to 1979. The Trial Chamber of the ECCC's hybrid international-national court convicted that regime's two surviving top leaders, and sentenced them to life imprisonment. The judges found Pol Pot's number 2, Nuon Chea, and the regime's head of state, Khieu Samphan, guilty of the genocide of Cambodia's ethnic Vietnamese minority. Nuon Chea was also found guilty of the genocide of the ethnic Cham Muslim minority.[1]

Cambodia's other ethnic minorities and religious groups also suffered severely at the hands of the Pol Pot regime. These included the ethnic Chinese, Thai, and Lao, the Khmer Krom, the Buddhist monkhood, and Cambodian Christians. The Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia did not prosecute the surviving Khmer Rouge leaders for genocide against these groups. Such cases might well have succeeded. Cambodia's ethnic Thai minority of 20,000 is reported to have been reduced to about 8,000 people. Of the 1,800 families of the Lao minority, only

[1] ECCC, Trial Chamber, *Summary of Judgement, Case 002/02*, November 16, 2018: https://www.eccc.gov.kh/en/document/public-affair/summary-judgement-case-00202. The full judgement was released on March 23, 2019: https://www.eccc.gov.kh/en/document/court/case-00202-judgement

800 families survived. Of the 2,000-strong Kola minority, Cambodians found "no trace" of them in 1979.[2]

The subject of this book is the highlander peoples of Ratanakiri Province in Cambodia's remote northeast. It is plausibly estimated that as many as half of that population perished under Khmer Rouge rule.[3] The Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia could therefore have prosecuted a case against Khmer Rouge leaders for genocide of perhaps a dozen of these ethnic groups living in Cambodia's north-eastern hill tracts, especially in the forested Ratanakiri borderlands, close to Viêt Nam and Laos. Frédéric Bourdier is one of a small group of scholars who have done the most to bring international attention to the cultures, lives, and experiences of these peoples.[4] This book continues his contribution to that important story. Told through the eyes of an ethnic Jarai highlander youth who joined the Khmer Rouge in the mid-1960s, the book details not only the mass killings that took place in Ratanakiri, but also the cultural genocide that began as early as 1966. In that year, Pol Pot and Ieng Sary prohibited use of the Jarai written language and script. After 1971, they attempted to suppress highland customs and religion.

Ieng Sary, who died in jail in 2013 during his trial for crimes against humanity and genocide, once claimed that "the revolution began in the Northeast Zone." Sary asserted in 1976 that its hill peoples "were not commercially oriented, and they had class hatred".[5] Sary was probably describing the kind of revolution that he and Pol Pot favoured. The Khmer Rouge forces they led in the Northeast in May 1968

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[2] Ben Kiernan (1996), *The Pol Pot Regime: Race, Power, and Genocide in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge,* 1975-79, New Haven, Yale University Press, 477 p. [French Version: Ben Kiernan (1998), *Le Génocide au Cambodge, 1975-1979: Race, idéologie et pouvoir*, translated in French by Marie-France de Paloméra, Gallimard, NRF Essais, 1998, 306-75, 498-510, 534-43]; (quoted by the author with the French version).

[3] Ben Kiernan (1998), *Le Génocide au Cambodge*, *op. cit*., p.373 (quoted by the author with the French version).

[4] An early journalistic account of the Khmer Rouge insurgency in the northeast is T.D. Allman, "Cambodia 1970: Rock and Rebellion in Remote Ratanakiri," *Bangkok Post*, 1 February 1970, pp. 13-14. See also Jonathan Padwe, *Disturbed Forests, Fragmented Memories: Jarai and Other Lives in the Cambodian Highlands*, Seattle, University of Washington Press, 2020.

[5] Author's interview with a woman who attended lectures by Ieng Sary in Phnom Penh in 1976, Paris, 1 February 1980.

began "inciting people to boycott schools and hospitals and leave the towns."[6] This sounds like an early harbinger of the forced evacuation of Phnom Penh in April 1975.

Pol Pot, too, romanticized his own participation in these events in the Northeast in 1968. Speaking in 1977, he said: "In the Northeast, we rose up on 30 May 1968. Only four or five guns were seized from the enemy. Coupled with the four or five guns we had for the protection of our Central Committee headquarters, we were armed with less than ten guns with which to face the enemy in the Northeast".[7]

In August 1968, Prince Sihanouk briefly blamed the revolt on outsiders: "Foreigners have infiltrated Ratanakiri ... A few days ago, we caught over forty Laotian Reds."[8] But the next day, Sihanouk admitted that the prisoners were "Khmers Rouges". He went on: "Now that these forty Reds have been shot, the situation is quiet for the moment." In addition, "nine Khmer Red leaders who pretended to be Laotians" had also been executed.[9]

Significantly, Cambodia's Northeast was the scene of the violent Khmer Rouge rupture with the Vietnamese communists. In 1972, Ieng Sary privately told Khmer sympathizers that his forces had clashed with the Vietnamese in the late 1960s. He gave an account of perhaps the first battles of the Viêt Nam-Cambodia conflict, which erupted into full-scale war in the late 1970s. According to a Khmer student in Yugoslavia, who attended the closed meeting in Albania in 1972: "Ieng Sary was [military] commander for the Northeast Zone. There was strong defence against the Vietnamese before the 1970 coup."[10]

This book offers a fascinating and revealing insight into the Cambodian genocide and the conflict with Viêt Nam that accompanied and partly defined it. But it is also the heartrending tale of a highland teenager who at first spoke no Khmer, his recruitment and subsequent betrayal by those he considered his leaders, their

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[6] *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts* (SWB), FE/2784/A3/2 (my emphasis). See Ben Kiernan, *How Pol Pot Came to Power: Colonialism, Nationalism, and Communism in Cambodia, 1930-1975*, 1985, Second Edition, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2004, pp. 273-75.

[7] Phnom Penh Radio, translated transcript, United States, Central Intelligence Agency, *Foreign Broadcast Information Service* (*FBIS*), October 4, 1977, pp. H20-21.

[8] BBC *SWB,* FE/2852/A3/1.

[9] *Ibid.,* FE/2855/A3/4.

[10] Author's interview with Chhil Chhanno, Toul, 28 October 1979.

decimation of his family and clan during his long absence from home, and his eventual return and disillusionment.

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A Whitney Griswold Professor Emeritus of History
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Professor of International & Area Studies, MacMillan Center (2005-2021),
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# PROLOGUE

Mathieu Guérin

For more than a quarter of a century that he has devoted himself to the anthropology of the peoples of the highlands of north-eastern Cambodia, and in particular of the province of Ratanakiri, Frédéric Bourdier has become an essential author for those who want to understand these peoples. and the changes, sometimes violent, to which they are subjected.

The territory of what is now Ratanakiri Province was not part of Cambodia until 1904. It was then the hinterland of Stung Treng Province. Lying between Laos, Cambodia and Viêt Nam, it was part of the highland space evading state authority that James Scott called Zomia. Until 1893 and the reunification of Laos with French Indochina, its inhabitants mainly had relations with the Lao principality of Champasak. When this territory became part of the Kingdom of Cambodia, the Khmers made up only about a tenth of the population and were concentrated in the west. Lao villages were built along the three main rivers, Sé San, Sré Pok and Sé Kong. The downstream lands and the central plateau were inhabited by Tampuan, Brao or Jarai peoples who were reluctant to accept administrative authority. French colonization took the state to the highlands. In the period following independence, Prince Sihanouk's regime implemented a policy of integration, including coercion, into the Cambodian nation-state then under construction. The inhabitants of this strategic space located on the borders of Cambodia, Laos and Viêt Nam regularly had to suffer armed interventions from outside the country during the Indochinese conflicts of the second half of the 20th century.

During the international colloquium on Khmer studies organized at the National Institute of Oriental Languages and Civilizations in Paris in 2011, Frédéric Bourdier

called for the development of an ethno-history of the people who lived without writing, in Cambodia, "that is, - tell the story subjectively memorized and reported by local populations". He thus invited the audience "to understand the reconfigurations of imaginations relating to the past of peoples with regard to the drastic modifications of their social and natural ecosystem".[11] The exercise is difficult since it involves combining both the techniques of the historian and the ability to listen, observe and analyse of the anthropologist.

In *Time of war, time of revolt among the indigenous populations of Cambodia*, Frédéric Bourdier follows an already ancient and prestigious tradition of ethnologists from the highlands of the centre of the Indochinese peninsula, who become historians of the peoples they study in allowing us to capture the gaze of those who are never listened to on their own history. In the 1960s, Georges Condominas, Jean Boulbet or Jacques Dournes had paved the way.[12] Now, researchers, geographers, anthropologists and linguists, such as Ian Baird, Jonathan Padwe, Catherine Scheer, Sylvain Vogel and, obviously, Frédéric Bourdier offer us avenues for understanding the ancient or recent past of the inhabitants of highlands of Cambodia.[13] The historian can only rejoice in this dynamism.

The collection of the testimony of Phi Phuon, a young Jarai who worked for the Khmer Rouge in 1963 is part of this movement. A Khmer Rouge when he was 16, Phi Phuon pursued a career in the service of Democratic Kampuchea. He was the messenger, guide, bodyguard of the regime's caciques. He served in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs after the Khmer Rouge took power in 1975 where he worked close by Ieng Sary, Pol Pot, Ta Mok and Son Sen.

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[11] Frédéric Bourdier (2012), Réflexion pour une ethnohistoire des peuples sans écriture du Cambodge, *Péninsule*, n°65 : pp. 23-41.

[12] Georges Condominas (1965), *L'exotique est quotidien - Sar Luk Vietnam central*, Paris, Plon, 538 p. ; Jean Boulbet (1967), *Pays des Maa, domaine des génies, Nggar Maa', Nggar Yaang, essai d'ethno-histoire d'une population proto- indochinoise du Viêt Nam central*, Paris, EFEO, 184 p. ; Jacques Dournes (1977), *Pötao : une théorie du pouvoir chez les Indochinois Joraï*, Paris, Flammarion, 368 p.

[13] Ian Baird (2020), *Rise of the Brao. Ethnic Minorities in Northeastern Cambodia during Vietnamese Occupation* ; Chicago, Unversity of Chicago Press, 392 p.; Jonathan Padwe (2020), *Disturbed Forests, Fragmented Memories, Jarai and other Lives in the Cambodian Highlands, Seattle, University of Washington Press, 280 p.* ; Sylvain Vogel (2015), *Voix du Mondulkiri historique*, Phnom Penh, UNESCO, 697 p. ; Catherine Scheer (2014), *La réforme des gongs : dynamiques de christianisation chez les Bunong protestants des hautes terres du Cambodg*e, PhD thesis, Paris, EHESS.

The testimony he gave to Frédéric Bourdier, combined with the stories of other people around him and the main studies on the Khmer Rouge movement, allows us to understand the path that leads a young peasant from the forest to make the choice in the 1960s to rally to a communist revolution, which proved to be extremely brutal in the decade that followed. Phi Phuon says he did not understand the violence of the regime. The reality of his good faith is of little importance here. It's not about judging, it's about understanding.

We are fortunate to have this testimony delivered to us by an anthropologist who is familiar with the peasants of north-eastern Cambodia and who can put it in context. Frédéric Bourdier's empathy and respect for the Jarai, the Tampuan or the Brao is present in all of his writings on Ratanakiri. It immerses us in the lost universe of the young Tun of the Rocham clan, one of the fourteen matrilineal clans that emerged from the 'Derny hole at the beginning of the world', who became Phi Phuon the revolutionary. Before the war, the peasants of the forest were confronted with the arrogance, contempt and violence of representatives of a state come to "civilize" them and some, like Phi Phuon, decided to ally themselves with those who supported their struggle and their resistance: the Khmer Rouge. Frédéric Bourdier perfectly shows the logic behind this choice. It should be remembered, importantly, that this choice did not necessarily imply adherence to a deadly ideology of extreme violence.

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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would first like to thank Michael Vickery one of the most knowledgeable historians on the history of the Khmer Rouge who, shortly before his death on June 29, 2017 in Battambang, in northern Cambodia, took the trouble to reread the manuscript and encouraged me to the elucidate certain points in Phi Phuon's life as an indigenous dissident before his establishment in the regime in Phnom Penh from 1975 to 1979.

All my gratitude also goes to Ben Kiernan, historian of Cambodia of international renown who, several years before, had responded warmly to my request and sent me unpublished documents, in particular on the peasant upheaval of Samlaut in 1967 in the west of the Battambang Province.

Thanks to the generosity of Youk Chhang, director of the DC-CAM[14] centre, Phnom Penh, I had access to various archives and materials whenever needed. Besides, his project on Genocide Research and Education for the future generations is a model that deserve admiration, respect and solidarity.

Shortly before his death in 2011, Gerard Hickey, anthropologist American specialist in Viêt Nam and indigenous populations, called "mountain people" or “montagnards”, from the highlands before and during the American intervention, had read one of my first articles evoking the Khmer Rouge interlude in the province of Ratanakiri, later compiled in a book titled: "Ethnography of the indigenous populations of the northeast Cambodia.[15] His provocative questions and remarks prompted me to investigate the life of the indigenous populations that I present in this book.

Mathieu Guérin, Historian at the National Institute of Oriental Languages and Civilizations (Institut national des langues et civilisations orientales: INALCO) in France, a connoisseur of Mundolkiri Province, located just south of Ratanakiri

[14] The Documentation Center of Cambodia is a Cambodian non-governmental organization whose mission is to research and record the era of Democratic Kampuchea for the purposes of memory.

[15] Book written by Frédéric Bourdier, published at L’Harmattan in 2009.

Province, has always provided, and continues to provide, very good advice. He has definitely been an essential support for the neophyte historian that I am. He was able to comment, with skill and empathy, on my investigative techniques in ethnohistory.

Henri Locard invited me, in 2015, to carry out short oral surveys in Malai in the province of Bantey Meanchey, near the Thai border. Without this call, I probably would not have had the chance to get accepted by Phi Phuon, Soung Sikoeun (former Khmer Rouge cadre) and Saloth Ban, one of Pol Pot's nephews with whom many interviews took place. After Phi Phuon's death, his brother Rocham T'ven and his wife received me repeatedly, and with rare solicitude, at their home in Lom village in the remote district of Andong Meas located northeast of Ratanakiri. Ms. Sophea Kong, from Phnom Penh, accompanied me on two occasions over a period of a week each time to help me translate the interviews conducted in the village of Phi Phuon's family.

I will never forget Pan Van Day, who died prematurely in 2015, of Kachoh' origin from Kao Phiek village on the edge of the Sé San River which crosses the province from east to west. He was my first guide, collaborator and friend during my early missions in the province of Ratanakiri from 1994 to 1996. Endowed with an exceptional intelligence and a remarkable oral knowledge on the recent history of the province, it is to him that I owe the testimonies collected on the emergence and organization of the Khmer Rouge regime in the northern part of Cambodia. At that time, when Pol Pot came to power, he was an itinerant nurse and his incessant movements allowed him to develop multiple contacts which enabled him to obtain a panoptic, nuanced, balanced vision, free from cookie-cutter judgments.

Even if I cannot name them all, many other inhabitants of the province provided me with hospitality, assistance, collaboration and testimonies on this crucial moment in their past, most often without my asking them since at the beginning of my ethnographic foray I was not trying to concentrate my research activities on this period of their recent history. I would like to underline how grateful I am for the Tampuan families of Pachorn village who, from 1994 until today in 2020, continue to receive me and treat me as "the friend of the village". Without their repeatedly expressed encouragement, notwithstanding their recklessness to accompany me, I would hardly have been able to undertake all my research activities in Ratanakiri

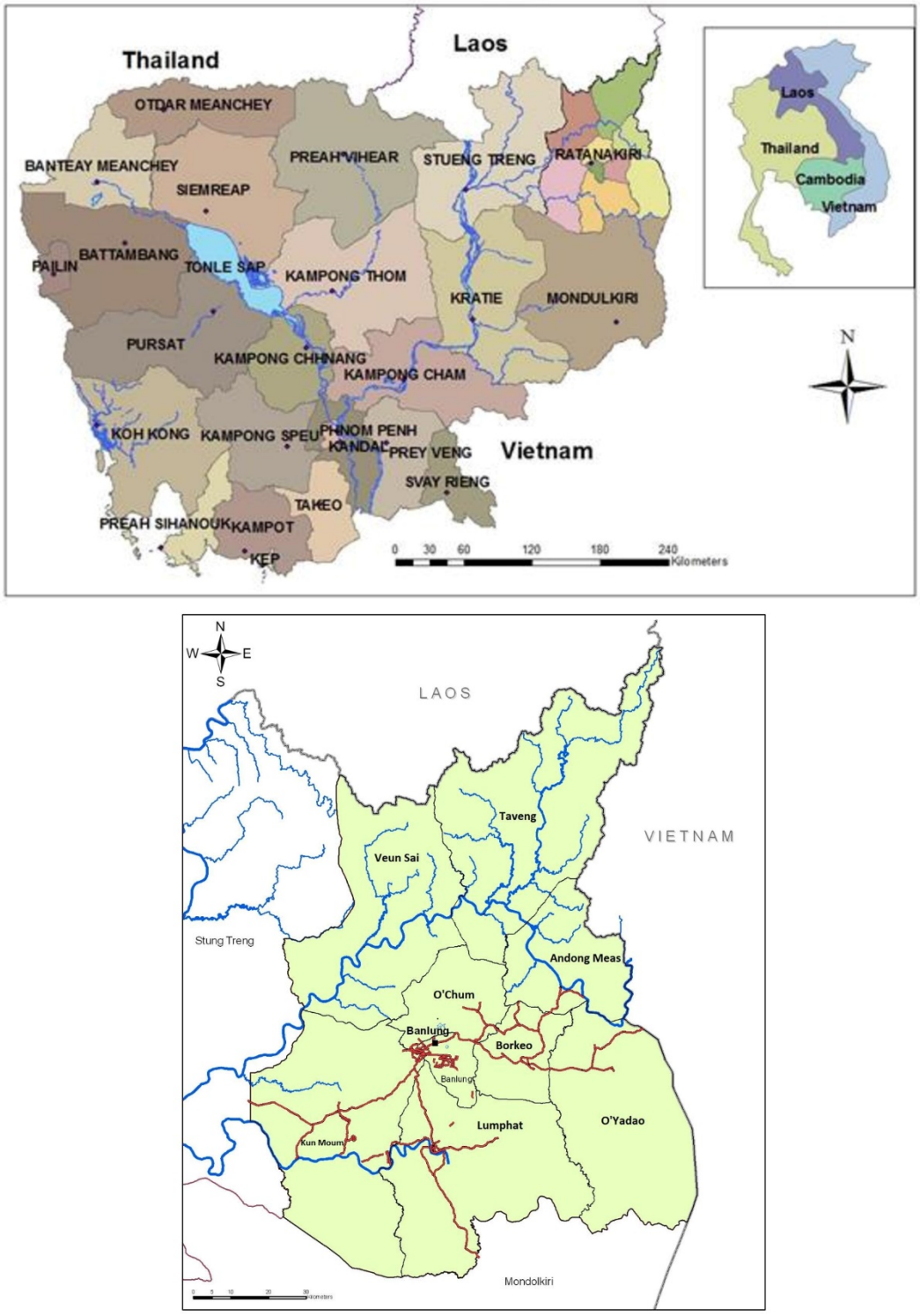
over the long term. I dedicate this book to them, in particular to my friends Dwin, Phally, Thôl, Keing and Srey Leap.

A thought goes out to Ms. Mony Pen, who always escorted me on short missions to Ratanakiri province and to my daughter Marine Susheela Bourdier, who had to put up with my absence during her childhood, but who never ceased to encourage me to continue my work. During her adolescence, she came with me during some of my wanderings in the forests of Ratanakiri and other wooded areas in the world. Without her repeatedly expressed encouragement, notwithstanding her recklessness in accompanying me, I would hardly have been able to undertake all my long-term research activities in Ratanakiri. I dedicate this book to her.

I would also like to warmly thank Yolaine Rouault and Philippe Puybareau who had the patience to reread the French version of the text. And, last but not least, all my gratitude to Jacques Derek Charlwood, the forever nomad, entomologist, photographer, poet, philosopher who edited the English text.

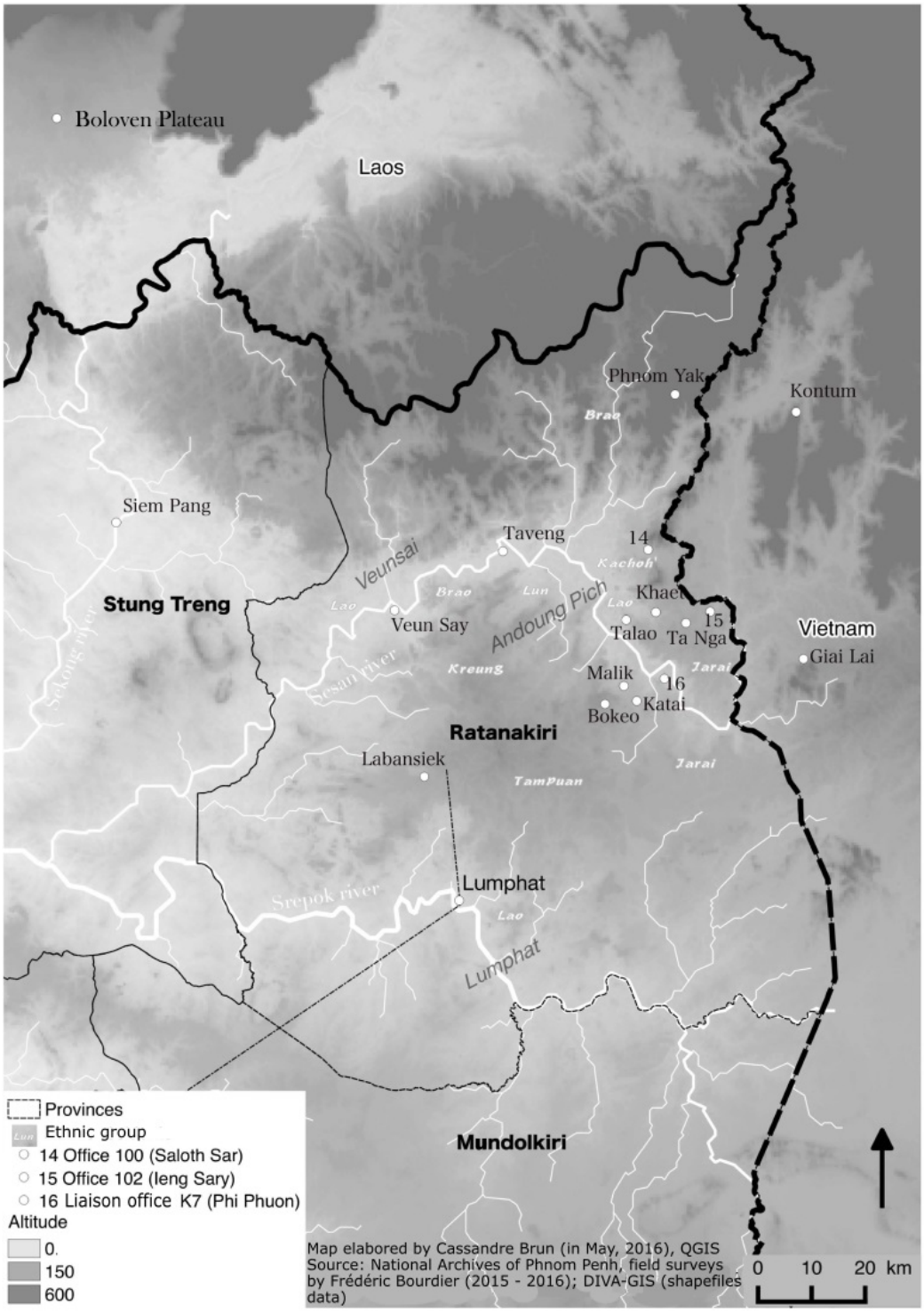
I remain, of course, fully responsible for any errors and omissions that may exist in the following text.

Map 1: Cambodia showing provincial boundaries and Ratanakiri Province (2015)




Prepared by Téphanie Sieng & Frédéric Bourdier, 2019

Map 2: Ratanakiri during Khmer Rouge presence (1967-1971)



Map 3: Viêt Nam War & main Hô Chi Minh Trail (1969-1975)

Sources: Frédéric Bourdier, 2015 & US *Foreign Broadcast Information Service*, 1977

# PHOTO CAPTIONS

(inserted altogether at the end of the text)

Photo 1: Negotiation: in the footsteps of history in one of the last strongholds of the former Khmer Rouge, Malai village, Bantey Meanchey Province, March 2015.

Photo 2: Lineage of Phi Phuon's mother, Andong Meas District, early 2000

Photo 3: Rocham Tveng (Phi Phuon's elder brother), Andong Meas District, January 2015.

Photo 4: Swidden land in a Kachoh' settlement, Veunsai District, Ratanakiri Province, June 2017

Photo 5: Preparing the *miir*, Brao villager, Taveng District, Ratanakiri Province, June 2017

Photo 6: Natural source of water in a Tampuan village, Ochum district, Ratanakiri Province, May 2018.

Photo 7: Ethnic Brao from Taveng forested area, whose family members have been evacuated in the U.S. in 1970, May 2013.

Photo 8: A former Khmer Rouge messenger, Bokeo District, Ratanakiri Province, March 2016.

Photo 9: Women preparing ceremonial food in honour of the deceased (Phi Phuon),
Jarai Lom village, Ratanakiri Province, April 2016.

Photo 10: Construction of the Phi Phuon burial site in his Jarai village, Ratanakiri Province, April 2016.

Photo 11: Buffalo sacrifice at the funeral of Phi Phuon, Jarai Lom village, Ratanakiri Province, April 2016.

Photo 12: The burial site of Pol Pot, who died in 1998, became a National Heritage and place of worship, Along Veng District, Oddar Meanchey Province, March 2014

Photo 13: “Survivor”: Brao woman who escaped the Khmer Rouge, Taveng District, June 2017.

# FOREWORD

In 2015 when the studies described in this book were still being undertaken, the Cambodian Kingdom was recovering from some thirty years of civil war from 1967-1968 to 1997-1998. This legacy of the past has spilled much ink and is likely to prompt further studies in the years to come. Strangely, no historical, or more precisely, ethno-historical, research has so far focused on the province of Ratanakiri, which was the first area of the country to fall entirely under the yoke of the *Khmer Krohom* (Khmer Rouge[16]) in mid-1970, more than a year before some other provinces located east of the Mekong River, and five years before the capture (called "liberation" by the Khmer Rouge) of Phnom Penh and the advent of the ultra-Maoist regime.[17]

The establishment of the first popular foundation of communist obedience in this remote province, near central Viêt Nam and South Laos, inhabited by ethnic minorities or indigenous populations, of Austroasiatic and Austronesian linguistic backgrounds[18], is fraught with meaning. In the absence of precise studies supposed to set the record straight, there is a considerable risk of misunderstanding the conditions which favoured the establishment of the Pol Pot administration within a non-Khmer population. This essential dimension, aimed at accusing the

[16] The term "Khmer Rouge" was the name Prince Norodom Sihanouk gave to his communist opponents in the 1960s. Their official name was the Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK).

[17] Except the recent book of Ian G. Baird essentially focusing on the post-Khmer Rouge Period 1979-1989 with the Brao. See: Ian G. Baird (2020), *Rise of the Brao Ethnic Minorities in North eastern Cambodia during Vietnamese Occupation*, Yale, University of Wisconsin Press, 392 p.

[18] Austronesian languages constitute a language family, widely spoken throughout Maritime Southeast Asia, Madagascar, the islands of the Pacific Ocean, Taiwan (by Taiwanese autochthonous peoples) and also in continental Asia. Austroasiatic languages, much more common in Cambodia, are large a large language family of Mainland Southeast Asia, also scattered throughout parts of India, Bangladesh, Nepal, and southern China. Sources: Gérard Diffloth, linguist, EFEO (Siem Reap, 2012).

indigenous populations of being the spearheads of the Khmer Rouge regime, will be explained in the following pages, in order to be firmly rejected later.

Before getting to the heart of the matter, a brief inventory, considering knowledge acquired on the Cambodian ultra-Maoist interlude deserves attention. The intention is not to comment on major works—this is not the place for such an already long-time debated scholarship—but to offer them as references to consult. To ignore the knowledge acquired, if only by mentioning the major works carried out, would in effect be to deprive the non-specialist reader of the possibility of obtaining a more integrated vision of this period of recent history, placed in its historical-geopolitical context, which is that of former Indochina, the cold war, North-South relations, communist expansion and American intervention.

Many treatises have focused on the Khmer Rouge period. It is impossible in this short essay to quote them all, and that is not the intention. Among the recognized authors, let us quote David Chandler[19] who, in addition to his numerous writings on the Khmer Rouge genocide, wrote the autobiography, translated into French, of Saloth Sâr alias Pol Pot.[20]. No less fundamental are the works of Michael Vickery[21], Ben Kiernan[22], Stephen Heder[23], Nayan Chanda[24] and Philip Short.[25] Each of these richly documented, complementary pieces of historical research, impossible to

[19] David Chandler (1993), *The Tragedy of Cambodian History: Politics, War and Revolution since 1945*, London, Yale University Press, 396 p; David Chandler (1996), *Facing the Cambodian Past*, Chiang Mai, Silkworm Books, 331 p.

[20] David Chandler (2003 [revised edition]), *Brother Number One: A Political Biography of Pol Pot*, Chiang Mai, Silkworm Books, 270 p.

[21] Michael Vickery (1984), *Cambodia: 1975-1982*, Boston, South End Press Sydney, George Allen & Unwin, 361 p.; Michael Vickery (1986), *Kampuchea Politics, Economics and Society*, London, Lynne Rienner Publishers, Boulder 211 p.

[22] Ben Kiernan (2008), *The Pol Pot regime: Race, Power, and Genocide in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, 1975-79*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 477p. [third edition]; Ben Kiernan (1985), *How Pol Pot Came to Power: A History of Communism in Kampuchea, 1930-1975*, London, Verso; Ben Kiernan and Chantou Boua (ed.) (1982), *Peasants and Politics in Kampuchea 1942-1981*, London, Zed Press, 401 p.; Ben Kiernan (1993), *Genocide and Democracy in Cambodia: The Khmer Rouge, the United Nations, and the International Community,* New Haven, Yale Southeast Asia Studies Council Monograph n°41.

[23] Stephen Heder (2004), *Cambodia Communism and the Vietnamese Model. Volume 1: Imitation and Independence, 1930-1975*, Bangkok, White Lotus, 270 p.

[24] Nayan Chanda (1988), *Brother Enemy. The War After the War: A History of Indochina since the fall of Saigon,* New York, MacMillan Publishing Company, 498 p.

[25] Philip Short (2004*), Pol Pot: The History of a Nightmare*, London, John Murray, 540 p.

summarize here, offers a privileged perspective and provides an essential overview to understand current mechanisms. Each of them provides a general framework of understanding for the reader concerned with apprehending what may have happened during these dark years in the Kingdom of Cambodia, and, if so, why and how.

Let us also quote the testimony of the American journalist Elisabeth Becker, one of the three Western foreigners officially invited by the leaders of the Khmer Rouge regime in November 1978[26], and the contribution of Andrew Mertha who was interested in Chinese technical aid.[27] In French literature, let us mention the poignant biography of Suong Sikouen[28], a former senior Khmer Rouge close to the leaders, as well as the comments of historian Henri Locard relating to revolutionary ideological remarks.[29] Less well known in the academic world are the two remarkable key works of Laurence Picq[30], the French ex-wife of the Khmer Rouge commander Suong Sikouen. She was one of the rare foreign people, and the only European, to work in Phnom Penh as a translator in the Department of Foreign Affairs from October 1975 to the beginning of January 1979. The priest François Ponchaud revealed to the whole world the testimonies of Khmers in the refugee camps in Thailand from 1975.[31] Finally, let us point out the meritorious work of sociologist Serge Thion who followed the development of the communist movement from the beginning of 1960's[32], as well as more recent ones by historian Sacha Sher who looked at the inner workings of the regime's structure.[33] Last but not least, it would be impossible not to mention the fascinating biography of Hô

[26] Elisabeth Becker (1998), *When the War Was Over: Cambodia and the Khmer Rouge Revolution*, New York, Public Affairs Books [second edition], 480 p.
[27] Andrew Mertha (2014), *Brothers in Arms: Chinese Aid to the Khmer Rouge 1975-1979*, Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 175 p.
[28] Suong Sikoeun (2013*), Itinéraire d'un intellectuel khmer rouge*, Paris, édition Cerf, 542 p.
[29] Henri Locard (2004), *Pol Pot's Little Red Book: The Sayings of Angkar, Bangkok, Silkworm Books, 336 p.*
[30] Laurence Picq (1989), Beyond the Horizon: Five Years with the Khmer Rouge, Vancouver, *St. Martin's Press, 218 p.* Laurence Picq (2013), *Le Piège khmer rouge*, préface d'Arnaud Vaulerin, Paris, Buchet/Chastel, 424 p.
[31] François Ponchaud (1978 [1977]), *Cambodia: Year Zero,* New York, Henry Holt & Co, 212 p.
[32] Serge Thion & Ben Kiernan (1981), *Khmers rouges ! : Matériaux pour l'histoire du communisme au Cambodge*, Paris, J.-E. Hallier/Albin Michel, 396 p.
[33] Sacha Sher (2004), *Le Kampuchéa des Khmers rouges : Essai de compréhension d'une tentative de révolution*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 484 p.

Chi Minh, admirably written by the historian William J. Duiker[34], an extremely well documented piece of work which gives indispensable insights with regards to both historical regional and worldwide geopolitical situations.

Less frequently research is carried out first hand and at the local level. Great historians like Ben Kiernan and Mickael Vickery carried out a number of personal surveys in many provinces of the country from the beginning of the 1980s, that is to say just after the fall of the Khmer Rouge regime. They gathered important testimonies from the victims as well as from perpetrators involved in the genocide. Fewer works have been devoted to the history of the Khmer Rouge at the micro-regional and local level. Sara Colm and Sorya Sim focused on the purges of ethnic minorities in the eastern province of Mundolkiri.[35] Jean-Michel Philippi, whose work has not yet been published, accumulated an impressive amount of knowledge on the continuity of the Khmer Rouge networks until the end of the 1990's in the southern province of Kampot near the Mekong delta in Viêt Nam. Other writing, most often testimonies collected in other provinces such as Kandal[36] and Kompong Cham[37], are available in the archives of DC-CAM in Phnom Penh (Cambodia documentation centre) and downloadable on the internet.

I intend to extend the investigations to the northern province of Ratanakiri where the collection of first-hand information remains sparse for the moment, apart from those already mentioned above carried out by my colleague Ian G. Baird, who focussed merely on the fate of the Brao ethnic group after the overthrow of the Khmer Rouge regime by the Vietnamese army in 1979. The research on Ratanakiri collected by Ben Kiernan, Philipp Short and Michael Vickery, as useful as they are, are based almost exclusively on second-hand data that is difficult to verify. On the other hand, investigations like those initiated by Sara Colm using direct

[34] William J. Duiker (2000), *Ho Chi Minh*, New York, Hyperion. For a more general history of Viêt Nam during the agitated period, see François Guillemot (2018), *Viêt Nam, fractures d'une nation. Une histoire contemporaine de 1858 à nos jours,* Paris, La Découverte.

[35] Sara Colm and Sorya Sim (2007), *Winds from the West: Khmer Rouge Purges in the Highlands of MondulKiri*, Phnom Penh, Documentation Center of Cambodia, 179 p.

[36] Vannak Huy (2003), *The Khmer Rouge Division 703: From Victory to Self-Destruction,* Phnom Penh, Documentation Center of Cambodia, 207 p.

[37] Osman Ysa (2006*), The Cham Rebellion: Survivors' Stories from the Villages,* Phnom Penh, Documentation Center of Cambodia, 184 p.

investigations in Mundolkiri and later on in Ratanakiri[38] are unusual. Sara Colm was, at the time, a member of the organization Human Rights Watch and her efforts focused on identifying those responsible—directly or indirectly—for decisions and actions that caused forced displacement, famine, disease, torture and death.

This essay intends to deepen and extend this approach which is in no way archived—and moreover not very fruitful—but which draws its sources through patiently established contacts and exchanges with several members of the local population. All in all, the information collected spans from 1994 to 2019.

As far as I am concerned, the desire to address the rise of the Khmer Rouge in this province is not aimed just at filling a void, although such a step might seem amply justified. Paradoxically, the choice to look closely at what happened in Ratanakiri is a matter of contingency.

I took my first steps in the province of Ratanakiri in 1994. After spending two years in southern India for my doctoral thesis, I arrived naively and without much knowledge with regard to this part of the Southeast Asian continent. Cambodia was still in the midst of civil war. There were virtually no tourists in Phnom Penh and even fewer in the outlying regions of the northeast. Equipped with a post-doc francophone scholarship, my intention was to study, for a year, the relations between societies and nature among the indigenous peoples in the province of Ratanakiri. From the outset, the French embassy tried to dissuade me from moving away from the capital Phnom Penh following the murders of three western tourists in the southern tip of the country less than two months before I arrived. I then wrote a discharge to be free of my movements and get to my destination. When I got there, I spent the first three months walking through a large part of the inhabited areas of the province in the company of my precious guide-interpreter Pan Van Day, an ethnic Kachoh' from a remote village located in the north. I then settled alone in a village of the Tampuan ethnic group, located about fifteen kilometres from the new Ban Lung municipality which at the time looked more like a dusty village in the Far West than a real provincial capital.

[38] Sara Colm (2009), The Khmer Rouge's Legacy for Highland Culture and Religion in North-eastern Cambodia, *in* Frédéric Bourdier (ed.), *Development and Dominion*, Bangkok, White Lotus, pp. 141-162.

It was during these three months of geographical excursions that the indigenous populations I met began—often on their own—to remind me of the continuity of the existence of the Khmer Rouge movement that I had imagined to be over fifteen years before. I was no specialist in the matter, nor had I come here to investigate it. But I could only listen to the memories and lingering preoccupations of those crucial moments from the past so often described and shared with me by my hosts. My scientific curiosity thus began to be fuelled and I paid more and more attention to the life stories of my successive hosts.

A disturbing event occurred one day in a village not far from the Sé San River. A few days before our arrival with Pan Van Day, a small group of about seven/eight Khmer Rouge (25-35-year-olds according to the villagers), all natives of Ratanakiri but at the time residing in the region of Along Veng had temporarily returned to their village in order to visit their former homes, extended kinship and their immediate family, but also to recruit, if necessary by force, adolescents to take them to fight in the remote district of Along Veng, a Khmer Rouge stronghold at that time (up to 1998).[39] This district of the province of Oddar Meanchey, located in the central north and close to the Thai border, was then one of the major bastions of the resistance controlled by Pol Pot, its head of the service of security Son Sen[40] and his dreadful military leader Ta Mok, nicknamed 'the butcher' (both by foreigners and Khmers).

Some of these soldiers, dressed all in black and armed with impressive machines like Kalashnikov machine guns, had terrorized the inhabitants of their own village of origin to such an extent that the father—then traditional chief of the village[41]—of the leader of the rebel troop resigned himself, under strong village pressure exerted by elders, to execute his son and the older and more menacing soldiers who accompanied him. Villagers did not tell me how the homicide occurred but it

[39] Dy Khamboly and Christopher Dearing (2014), *A History of the Along Veng community. The final stronghold of the Khmer Rouge movement,* Phnom Penh, Documentation series n°20, 176p.

[40] Son Sen and his wife have been brutally massacred along with nine members of their family, including their children, by order of Pol Pot in June 1997.

[41] At this time, each village already had an administrative chief (*Mephum*) responsible for liaising between the villagers, the district and provincial authorities, as well as one or different traditional chiefs, or rather, leaders (called *kra srok* among the Tampuan, etc.) recognized by the population as the ideal person, thanks to their wisdom and knowledge, to guide and advise them, while knowing how to maintain peaceful relations with the spirit world.

happened anyway. Everyone, you can imagine, was in shock. How can a father bury the son he had killed? Not to mention the angry spirits of the place who had to be appeased through a religious ceremony so as not to arouse their vengeance on the living human beings. Our unexpected arrival probably triggered uneasiness but at the same time caused a need to converse. Residents, especially young married women and village elders who had known forced labour camps and work groups (*krom snoul*), spontaneously began to tell Pan Van Day and myself in great detail of these traumatic events and of the sad return of these ethnic Khmer Rouge soldiers.

It was from this moment that I realized that this story—a latent civil war that never ended—was not only far from over but threatened to return, both in reality (part of the country was still controlled by the Khmer Rouge, not to mention several refugee camps located along the Thai-Cambodian border which served as places to regroup and reorganize rebel troops) and in the minds of many people. In retrospect, I could hardly content myself with studying nature/society relations without considering the resurgences of the recent past, all the more so as events, like the aforementioned one, came to update a memory not obscured, which was intimately mixed with the unfolding of forms of socio-cultural organizations of the present. In other words, beyond the original subject of work that preoccupied me scientifically, it seemed to me ethically inappropriate to ignore the persistence of the Khmer Rouge trauma in the province and its influence on the social and ecological life.

The present essay is not, however, intended to provide a careful assessment of everything that happened in Ratanakiri, before, during and after the Khmer Rouge, admitting that this possibility may not arise, given the increasing difficulty in obtaining information that is not obscured nor reworked by collective and individual memories. Even so, I am of the opinion that a more comprehensive work than that presented here deserves to be undertaken.

# NOTE ON SOURCES

In order to avoid referring only to first-hand data collected here and there from 1994 onwards, I decided to follow the significant socio-political changes that have occurred in Ratanakiri as well as in Cambodia and Viêt Nam[42] by situating the major events in their geopolitical context. Indeed, without the independence movement *Issarak* (see below), without the war in Viêt Nam, without the foreign diplomacy carried out in Cambodia and without national intransigence aimed at eliminating any form of dissent, everything suggests that the events in Ratanakiri would have taken another turn. Perhaps even the meeting between Pol Pot and the indigenous populations would not have taken place. This second-hand data, sometimes fed by personally-obtained sources, provides the backdrop to the scenario presented in this book. A great deal of information comes from more than a hundred testimonies collected across the province, not all of them are included in the text. Some are inserted in the text as the subject is dealt with. They most often reinforce the veracity of the text through cross-checking techniques and other ethnographic methods used to verify, as far as possible, the accuracy of the facts and recorded accounts. Some evasive or contradictory information was found to be unreliable, these have therefore been deleted from the account. I also look at the genealogy of a Jarai family, several of its members of which participated closely in successive revolutionary movements that took place in Viêt Nam[1] and Ratanakiri before the arrival of the Khmer Rouge, more precisely in the east of the province. This third source of information forms the basis of the book. To do this, a decision was made to concentrate on the life of Phi Phuon, a member of this Jarai family, from his adolescence until the moment when he[43] left the province with a few dozen individuals belonging to different ethnic groups from Ratanakiri responsible for accompanying the future Khmer Rouge leaders out from the eastern outlying area.

This period which extends from the memories of childhood and adolescence of Phi Phuon until the long march towards the south in 1970 is of major importance because it corresponds to the moment when a group of political dissidents, recently called "Khmer Rouge" by Prince Norodom Sihanouk, took refuge in the

[42] The Jarai (still) inhabit a vast expanse covering the Vietnamese highlands.

[43] Here, as elsewhere in this volume, I employ the third person singular pronoun in its masculine form. This has no significance for my argument, and readers are welcome to substitute the feminine form when they feel it, as it is the recent trend nowadays, and if they wish.

forests northeast of Ratanakiri very close to the Vietnamese border, from 1966. These future leaders lived in hiding near the local populations. They tried to initiate some residents into their cause by teaching them the techniques of armed guerrilla groups in the forests of the unoccupied zones before expanding their hegemony in the other eastern provinces of the Kingdom with astonishing rapidity from 1971. The rest is known: the mysterious leaders took the capital Phnom Penh on April 17, 1975, date of the establishment of an ultra-collectivist and totalitarian regime.

The recording of Phi Phuon's account of his childhood and adolescent life, therefore, takes place forty-five years later. Interviews and conversations with him were carried out in Malai (north-western Cambodia, a border commune with Thailand) in February 2015, first in the company of Henri Locard, a historian specializing in the Khmer Rouge[44], Suong Sikoeun (a former Khmer Rouge senior member trained in France in the sixties[45]), and Saloth Ban, alias So Hong, one of the nephews of Saloth Sâr, or Pol Pot, who joined his uncle in Ratanakiri before being assigned as a handler in the Department of Foreign Affairs in Phnom Penh once the regime was established. Phi Phuon died of a brain haemorrhage at the start of the Khmer New Year (mid-April) of that same year, 2015. It was the day before he left for the northeast, his homeland. He was due to leave by car the next morning and we had agreed to meet up with his brother Rocham Tveng in the Andong Meas district on the north-eastern edge of Ratanakiri. A first series of interviews with Rocham Tveng took place at this time in the absence of his late brother. A second series of long open dialogue took place in December 2015. Further encounters and discussions with this older brother and his extended family, as well as with former combatants and close neighbours, were carried out in the region on several occasions in 2016. It is also the year in which I was invited to attend, in April, the

[44] Author of several books on the Khmer Rouge, some of which have been questioned by historians such as Ben Kiernan, then director of the *Genocide Studies Program* at Yale University in the United States. One can nevertheless consult, but with caution, his work which aims to attribute the genesis of the Khmer Rouge movement to the role of Norodom Sihanouk as well as to the influence of Maoist China on the political and intellectual itinerary of Pol Pot, Nuon Chea or Khieu Sâmphan as well as the (dubious) heritage of Buddhist civilization. See Henri Locard (2013), *Pourquoi les Khmers Rouges*, Paris, Vendémiaire. 352 p.

[45] Suong Sikoeun since 1979 lived in the same village as Phi Phuon, but not in the same hamlet. The two men met there regularly. The former, however, never set foot in Ratanakiri province. See his remarkable autobiography: Suong Sikoeun (2013), *Itinerary of a Khmer Rouge intellectual*, Paris, Cerf Publishing House, 542 p.

second funeral of Phi Phuon which was to take place in his native province, arranged by his Jarai family. These varied sources of information supplemented the biography of his older brother, Rocham Tveng, and some of his fellows, whom I continued to meet until the beginning of 2017.

The personal testimonies presented below are not based on written documents which, although extremely precious, remain exceptional, not to say—in any case to my knowledge—almost non-existent, apart from a few formal reports written in Khmer by local party members who had to report in writing to higher authorities. In any event, no written source has ever been available as to the journey of Phi Phuon and his predecessors. The same is true of the living conditions of the time, of which I heard many reports thanks to the oral surveys undertaken from 1994.

Like all the interlocutors met during my wanderings in Ratanakiri and who shared their memories and testimonies with me, often spontaneously, the memory of Phi Phuon was likewise called upon, his own, as well as that of some relatives, including his older brother and wife, and old friends. Aware of the pitfalls associated with the transcription of life stories, I tried, as much as possible, to cross-check the individual information collected with records from the testimonies of other people, which led me to confirm, or to qualify—or even not to accept a single source contradicted by others—the reliability of the sources collected.

The numerous testimonies compiled in the province, for the first time in 1994-1996 during my first stay and subsequently during repeated visits to the province from 2004 until 2018, complete the data obtained more recently by Phi Phuon and his family.[46] Second-hand sources from historical studies evoking the rise of the regime in general, and in Ratanakiri in particular, are sometimes subject to critical examination with regard to the reliability of the sources.

Another matter comes with the use of Cambodian written language and, whenever needed in the text, the Vietnamese written language. The Khmer language, with its “sloping” size (one of the two ways of writings, the second being made with more elaborated “round” letters, mostly used for posters, book titles and shop names is

[46] Field trips, one or two per year, even if they did not focus solely on the subject of interest to us, varied from a week to ten days.

mostly used in normal printing) does represent the basis for the handwritten style. Contrary to the modern Vietnamese known as *quoc ngu* (national language), there is no Romanised Cambodian neither in the administration and in the common writing exchanges, nor in newspapers. Likewise, the modern Vietnamese script contains diacritical marks to indicate the proper tone to be adopted when pronouncing the words. In both cases, I have decided not to use those two writing styles, both official Khmer and Vietnamese written languages, since they may indisputably represent an unnecessary distraction to readers not conversant either in Khmer or in Vietnamese. I also decided not to use the International Phonetic Alphabet (API) which requires the acquisition of a large number of symbols that, for most French or English-speaking users, do not correspond to any identifiable sound reality.

# INTRODUCTION

The present research offers a new angle of approach hitherto overlooked, and at best quickly summarized, by the many historians and a few social scientists interested in examining the advent of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. Strange as it may seem, we still know little about the conditions for the emergence of a group which entered into rebellion, and more particularly the relations maintained from the start with the indigenous populations with whom they would stay from 1965.

As much in the national imagination as in many vulgar books, but also academic essays and articles that have looked at this obscure period of the Cambodian Kingdom, the geopolitical and socioecological conditions which allowed the future Khmer Rouge leaders to choose the province of Ratanakiri, in the north-east of the country, have been poorly studied. The decision to establish a series of rebel base-camps for preparing and organizing their underground armed struggle has not been totally ignored as has been more or less correctly pointed by serious investigators[47]. But the attempt to decipher the causes which temporarily united the Khmer Rouge and the indigenous populations appeared in both popular and specialist narratives more like a bad fiction story than a dispassionate historical and scientific analysis. Here arises the risk of a dangerous revisionism by totally misunderstanding the ongoing dynamics and, subsequently, falsely reinterpreting what really happened, and how.

Moreover, some discordant voices (and I assume the position that there is no need to quote them for any unnecessary controversial debates), unfortunately having some echoes in the Cambodian public sphere, cannot admit that such a disastrous regime could be entirely created by Khmers alone. Definitely, there was something or some "others" behind the scenes. Based on these assumptions, there immediately arises a sordid conspiracy theory (even if not explained as such)

[47] Sara Colm *(*2006*), op. cit.;* Ben Kiernan (2008*), op. cit.*

claiming that the province was one of the first areas in a position to build a solid base for the doctrine of ultra-Maoist inspiration *because* it was inhabited by populations able to follow them: the indigenous peoples. The latter are considered to be not just innocent forest dwellers but initiators. They already lived in a kind of "primitive communism" that could be taken as a model for a more equal society. Indigenous people were consequently the natural enemies of the corrupted city dwellers. Everything then took place as if this encounter between extremist proponents of the armed struggle and indigenous populations was not a combination of circumstances, nor the fruit of chance, but a predestined "path", like two souls in pain sharing the same ideal and finding themselves at a crossroads in order to walk together. This is the myth of origin, in its anthropological depiction, that persists surreptitiously and needs to be entirely deconstructed.

The main objective of this essay is to trace the geopolitical, material and existential circumstances which made Ratanakiri one of the very first bastions for the Khmer Rouge armed struggle. The first popular Khmer Rouge secret, but official, meeting in the country was established in Ratanakiri in the middle of the 1970s, just after the *coup d'état* that overthrew Prince Sihanouk. The purpose of the study is precisely to question certain ideas implicitly taken for granted, namely the irrationality, ignorance, brutality, congenital servitude and inclination of the indigenous peoples—devoid of any ideology—inclined to blindly follow a firm command, notwithstanding its murderous attitude. Ideas which deliberately, or unconsciously, transformed into prejudices, offer an incomplete reading and one biased against the complicated and ambiguous relations between indigenous populations and future Khmer Rouge leaders.

Given his knowledge of the operating methods of his society, the choice to look at the biography of an indigenous ex-Khmer Rouge[48] helps recall the extreme cultural richness and the multiplicity of forms of thought of hunter-gatherer societies. The evocation of the complexity of knowledge and life practices reduces to nothing the far-fetched ideas concerning the congenital degradation of forest peasants, an idea

[48] The term "indigenous" (rather the nowadays recommended "autochthonous" by the United Nations in 2007), as a common name or as an adjective, is written in this text to designate the non-Khmer ethnic populations originating from the province of Ratanakiri. The designations "highlander", "montagnard", and "ethnic minority" are similar to the first aforementioned and will also be used with the same meaning.

regrettably still peddled by a few Cambodians. Such a source of information about knowledge of indigenous populations is relatively well known among ethnologists who have been working in this region but not systematically among historians.

Let us say from the outset that Ratanakiri became the preferred refuge for future Khmer Rouge leaders from the mid-1960s primarily for security reasons (protection against Sihanoukist repression, isolation in the forest) and strategic ones (including technical support from the Vietnamese army willing to materially and ideologically support the Cambodian armed struggle, accessibility to Hanoi and increased facility for visits to China) and not ideological ones (a population culturally inclined to receive and actively support them). Ratanakiri was not, as one would sometimes be tempted to believe in the course of certain ill-informed readings, the only ground of refuge for dissidents. Other future executives, even if they were not always the elite intellectual movement, simultaneously took refuge in various northern and western provinces of the country. Likewise, the previous refuge of Pol Pot just before Ratanakiri was near the border but on the Vietnamese side. Before, we had no idea where the border is—people exchanged, communicated, intermarry and built relationships (we sometimes shared chicken or ducks with each other).

The general idea that prevailed for a long time, and which is still partially buried in some minds anxious to throw stones at easy scapegoats, is that the indigenous populations were ideal targets for the advent of the Khmer Rouge. These forest peoples were at the time culturally predestined to welcome them with open arms[49]. As such, they were the primary factor, necessary for the development of the revolutionary political movement. Many are the testimonies of former Khmer Rouge soldiers and victims, reproduced immediately in historical and popular works to depict the inhabitants of the highlands as forces of nature but also as ignorant and backward, predisposed to blindly obey any grossly imposed hierarchy. In addition to their physical capacity and absolute dedication, their impeccable feelings would assign them to become the perfect guardians of the revolution, and would push such innocent and easily brainwashed indigenes to accomplish

[49] Such has been the statement pronounced in front of me just after my arrival in December 1994 in the country by a French military officer working since the UNTAC period in Cambodia. I met after similar presumptions elsewhere.

dangerous missions, including those that could prove fatal for their loved ones. Without wishing to name sources that I consider outdated, not to say offensive, this unhealthy tendency to reproduce cookie-cutter judgments, in no way justified by objective scientific data, has gone so far as to "tribalize" the rise of the Khmer Rouge regime and "*Khmer-rougérise*" the indigenous populations.

It is even advanced, bluntly and sometimes without nuance, that the future leaders in exile in the province would have been inspired by a so-called original communism which reigned among the various social groups of Ratanakiri. Pol Pot, who lived among the Jarai for a time, indeed admired—at least according to some testimonies of the Brao, Jarai and Tampuan who rubbed shoulders with him and whom I was to meet later—their ability to survive in the forest, their autonomy, their simplicity as well as their integrity. From there to affirm the existence of a symbolic fusion between the whole population and the future tyrants, is only a simple step away, not only adopted by some researchers but also incorporated and digested by local, national and international representations. More formally, in the absence of overwhelming evidence, unfinished research leaves the shadow of doubt in the face of this incestuous alliance, and it is precisely this doubt that this book intends to reject and pass into oblivion once and for all.

To let such ineptitude smoulder, which draws its sources from a denial of history mixed with an insidious form of ethnic racism, is irresponsible, even though this fable built from nothing handicaps the minds of young contemporary Cambodians, who did not experience this dark period, less and less. However, a scientist has a duty to redraw—whenever needed—the lines of life[50] thanks to complementary methods of anthropological and historical investigations. We owe this duty of memory to the people of Ratanakiri.

It is also ethical to grasp as much as possible the circumstances, steeped in misunderstanding, which led to the adhesion—moreover very relative, I insist on this point—of the indigenous populations to the Khmer Rouge cause. Indigenous groups were maybe bound to follow a rebel movement, because they were already in a state of rebellion, but not a single indication can show they were sharing a similar ideology by using similar barbaric methods. Not with regard to an ethics of conviction or responsibility, as Marx Weber understands it, or even out of

[50] Tim Ingold (2015), *The life of lines*, London Abingdon, Routledge, 172 p.

sympathy or friendship towards the peasants of the forest of Ratanakiri, but for the sake of disentangling the web of circumstances which led to this meeting, which I persist in labelling as “incestuous”, between local inhabitants and Khmer Rouge skilled enough to seduce, manipulate and abuse the former right from the beginning in the sixties.

Let’s take a quick look at recent history. Created in 1959, the province of Ratanakiri was then mainly populated by non-Khmer indigenous populations. Sihanoukist politics quickly contemplated the assimilation of different ethnic groups without any consideration for their styles and practices of life. It was about civilizing these people, admittedly sympathetic but "primitive" and "backward", to dress them correctly and to encourage them to modify their cultural practices, considered archaic. The first attempts at territorial and cultural colonization, led by soldiers from the royal army, Khmer administrators and the first national or foreign entrepreneurs (like the French and to some extent some Chinese), led to many blunders, even if remote areas of the province, largely covered with forests and often difficult to access, remained almost neglected by fruitless attempts at development.

In such a context, it is not surprising that ideas of resistance to the oppressor, Khmer and foreign—real or imagined—found fertile ground in Ratanakiri. The threats, launched by the colonizers and the reactions deployed in return by a section of the population existed, as we will see later, before the advent of the Khmer Rouge. In some places, such as the western edge of the central plateau, some of the ancestral lands of the Brao and Tampuan had been confiscated for the benefit of a rubber plantation project. Insubordination to exogenous interference began to prevail in earnest until the intervention of the royal army (from the mid-sixties in the northeast of the country), which put down the rebellion movements. The eastern part of the province was also the scene of several clashes. They were mentioned by Phi Phuon and his family as well as by the Lao people interviewed. These uprisings were scattered and did not lead to a lasting mobilization or to a movement of provincial scope. Nevertheless, the memory of these spoliations, aggravated by physical violence, would contribute to fuel indelible feelings of resentment. Fertile ground was there for the Khmer Rouge, and they knew very well how to exploit this feeling.

When the future Khmer Rouge went into hiding in the province in order to organize their armed struggle, they found a province already in the grip of a poorly expressed, frequently silent, often inhibited, but well and truly present, revolt. Some of these small movements were only temporary agitations and died out prematurely, either on their own or as a result of armed repression, while other forms of sedition persisted. Revolts, or more precisely the signs of discontent displayed or repressed, were irregularly anchored in time and space depending on places and recent circumstances. The contours of these agitations, often fleeting in appearance, were not always clearly drawn, the indigenous leaders were evanescent and the organization between these diffuse movements was almost non-existent. But discontent was indeed there, ready to reappear more visibly at any moment.

This disorderly, but almost endemic, configuration turned into an unexpected opportunity for Pol Pot, Ieng Sary and their acolytes. A federation of these disparate movements was possible for these well-educated, informed politicians and strategists who emerged from the city, on condition that they guide the local societies skilfully. This was the mission they intended to perform, with a clear difference: rallying discontent was not really about supporting the cause of indigenous peoples. Modern, universal and tantalizing notions of the right to self-determination, respect for human rights and even social justice were completely absent from the agenda of the Khmer Rouge dissidents. Their revolution required at all costs the unwavering support of the popular masses of Ratanakiri, and then of all the citizens of the country. The province could very well serve as a theatre of experimentation, due to the widespread levels of dissatisfaction encountered.

It is against this background that I want to describe and analyse the process of encounter between the Khmer Rouge and the indigenous populations. Not, by the way, that the latter were desperately looking for a political guru. But we can already hypothesize that at least some of them were likely to listen to the ideals of people who, through rhetoric and their presence on the ground, and their showing a semblance of empathy and manipulating their feelings valued them as “first peoples”. So many noble revolutionary feelings which, once power was obtained in the province at the end of 1970, turned into deep contempt for these same peoples.[51]

[51] As early as 1971, social, religious and cultural practices, as well as their semi-nomadic way of life, were strictly prohibited by Pol Pot, who four years earlier had never ceased to admire their

It is irrefutable that Ratanakiri was the first province declared "free" against the endured oppression led by the Sihanoukist administration and then against the republican government of Lon Nol (which took power from the beginning of 1970 to April 1975 by overthrowing Prince Sihanouk). But if it was the first important territory to fall under the control of the revolutionary forces, the inhabitants quickly became disillusioned as soon as the Khmer Rouge regime showed its true face a few months later. We will come back to this point in the last chapters of this book.

Let us just say for the moment that, as in all other provinces, some believed them and others did not. From 1971, some residents became soldiers in the service of the new regime—especially young people, sometimes under duress, sometimes and in spite of their immature age of their own accord—while others, representing the vast majority of the population, were victims separated from their family of forced labour, torture, murder and death linked to exhaustion, lack of health care, and lack of food. In any case the populations of Ratanakiri, even if considered as 'first peoples' (*mulethan*)[52] did not benefit from privileged treatment, including until the end of 1976 as Michael Vickery was wrongly tempted for a moment to ponder.[53] Here, as elsewhere, the memory of this bewildering regime still haunts survivors, regardless of their ethnic origin, and regardless of their political rallying at the time (for those who presented one). Therein lies the memory of the inhabitants of the province that it is a question of rehabilitating.

To illustrate this point, I choose to follow the itinerary of a Jarai who, while still young, very early on found favour with Pol Pot and Ieng Sary. He was part, as he himself admitted at the end of his life, of "those who believed in it". His story, far

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knowledge. See: Personal Inquiries (cited below) and Ben Kiernan (2008), *The Pol Pot regime: Race, Power, and Genocide in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, 1975-79*, London, Yale University Press, pp. 82-83.

[52] The Khmer Rouge radical movement clearly differentiated on the one hand the authentic people (or first people called *mulethan*) including the peasants of the countryside, and on the other hand the new people (assimilated to the degenerated people of the cities), essentially corrupt, considered as parasitic, and deserving of being "re-educated" which means to be physically eliminated.

[53] Quoted by Ben Kiernan, *op. cit*., p. 205. It should be noted that Michael Vickery's rumination echoes two testimonies collected in 1976 from refugees in Thailand. It can in no way apply to the whole province.

from being anecdotal, can very well be found in other people whose thought mechanisms will be mentioned from time to time: those who at the outset were charmed by speeches that were inspiring because they were bringing hope and concrete solutions, before being traumatized by the backdrop. Despite everything, Phi Phuon remains a special case insofar as he remained loyal to the Khmer Rouge until 1996, the year of his defection, two years before their final surrender in 1998 and eighteen years after their overthrow by Vietnamese troops in January 1979.

Unlike much of the country's population, he did not live directly under the rule of the Khmer Rouge. He remained isolated and confined to the premises of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Phnom Penh. He did not experience the forced labour camps nor the prison living conditions of the relocated populations. He pretended he did not see people dying of hunger, disease or exhaustion. He always stated that he did not know what happened in his remote province between 1971 and 1979, which was likely given the silos of information within the *Angkar* organization itself. He was not directly involved in the genocide and claims to have had no knowledge of it: which is possible but perhaps partly wrong (apart from the head of Toul Seng prison in Phnom Penh, all the Khmer Rouge accused of crimes against humanity and who marched in front of the tribunal in Phnom Penh affirmed the same thing). In the end, what he initially believed, like most indoctrinated indigenous and non-indigenous persons, was less the coming to power of the Khmer Rouge with the establishment of a regime of terror than the possibility of seeing some more “peaceful” achievements come to fruition. They quickly found themselves dispossessed of their own social revolts by leaders who cleverly knew how to lie to them and to gently manoeuvre them.

# Chapter 1

# A VILLAGE IN THE FOREST

Phi Phuon, of Jarai origin, spent the first 23 years of his life in the northeast of what is now the northern province of Ratanakiri.[54] Originally, this vast territory of 12,561 km$^2$, located more than 600 km from Phnom Penh, was populated by seven indigenous ethnic minorities (nowadays called *chunchiet dam piektek*), as well as Laotians—also referred to as Lao in the text—and Vietnamese. Few Chinese traders or Khmers dared to venture into the forests, apart from the Cambodian labour recruited by the French. The Jarai concentrated in the east of the province constitute the second demographically dominant group, just after the Tampuan residing on the central plateau of the interfluvial zone.[55]

## The warrior clan

Phi Phuon was born on August 18, 1947 in the village (*Phum*) Khaet located about ten kilometres from Viêt Nam and more than fifty kilometres from South Laos.

[54] The present province of Ratanakiri was created administratively in 1959 under the leadership of Prince Norodom Sihanouk. The territory previously depended on the province of Steung Treng - Moulapoumok, itself a vassal region of the southern Laotian kingdom of Champasak until 1904. See Charles Meyer (1979), the new provinces. Ratanakiri-Mundolkiri*, Revue Monde en Développement*, Paris, 28, pp. 682-690.

[55] Demographic data by ethnicity is not available for this time period. The only fairly reliable reference is reported by Jean Fontanel (1967), *Ratanakiri: study of the natural environment*, Grenoble, 1967, comes from the National Institute for Statistics and Economic Research. It dates from 1962. It describes 49,306 inhabitants distributed in the three districts of Veunsai, or Veun Say (north-west), Lumphat (south) and Andoung Pich (center and north-east) with populations respectively estimated at 17 026, 18,152, and 14,128 inhabitants.

*Phum* Khaet depended on the current Ta Lao commune which adjoined the Sé San River. The Sé Sé San san has its source in the Vietnamese highlands and flows into the Mekong after joining the Sré Pok (coming from Viêt Nam) and Sé Kong Rivers (passing through the southern Laotian Attapeu region) in the neighbouring province of Steung Treng. The location of the village was, at that time, ten kilometres east of the river.

The vast majority of the inhabitants of the zone flanked between the Sé San River and the border with Viêt Nam are Jarai.[56] They have long shared this rugged forest region with the Lao people whose habitats are spread over three hamlets along the river, and the Kachoh' who reside mainly in four villages located on the eastern hillsides.[57]

The Lao are descendants of migrants (mainly men) from the Boloven plateau, formerly belonging to the Kingdom of Champasak, and from the neighbouring province of Savannakhet. They devote themselves mainly to fishing and flooded rice cultivation which they introduced upon their arrival towards the end of the nineteenth century, both near the jarai habitats and in the low inter fluvial zones of Ratanakiri (Veunsai, Lumphat). The Kachoh' are, like the Jarai, a people of migrants residing mainly in the foothills of the hills and the lowlands extending as far as the neighbouring Vietnamese province of Gia Lai.

An important point of reference, according to Phi Phuon, is that the Rocham clan, which was his mother's clan, was more than the others a clan of "warriors at heart". Many of its members, both in Viêt Nam and Cambodia, were the first to mobilize and then to incite the other Jarai clans to join the successive revolutions, including against the French colonizers, taking place in this mountainous part of former Indochina. His bilateral family, as much on his mother's side as that of his father, had, in fact, been involved for a long time (three generations before him) in the social and political movements which mark the course of the history of his people.

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[56] The Jarai are much more numerous in the neighboring eastern country, where they occupy vast contiguous territories mainly located in the highlands. A northern part of the Jarai region was also attached to Laos in 1893 then to Annam in 1904. Sources indicate that many Jarai villages were accommodated in Cambodia in 1907. See Jean Boulbet (1975), *Paysans de la forêt*, Paris, École française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO), 352 p.

[57] The three societies of Jarai, Tampuan and Kachoh' in Ratanakiri, whose social organization relies on clan structures, have a maternal and matrilocal lineage with a tendency to ultimogeniture for the youngest.

His maternal grandfather, Rocham Pa, and his maternal grandmother, Romam Phot, encouraged their eldest son, Hun who was the father of Rocham Tveng, to engage in the revolt against the French presence, then led by the Viet Minh. These men and women who involved were given the name *Issarak* or more precisely *Khmer Issarak.*[58]

Phi Phuon expressed the desire to recall that the threat of interference from the Khmers, who in the first half of the twentieth century constituted a distant people and were very little known to the common Jarai, was the subject of particular concern. It is interesting to note that the customary law of the Jarai (*Toloi Djuat*)[59] forbade revealing to the Khmers the location of villages and rice granaries scattered around the land.

Having left with the Viet Minh[60]—or more precisely the North Vietnamese Army who succeeded it—after the Geneva Accords of July 21, 1954, Hun died in Hanoi without having the opportunity to complete his political training. His widow, Aunt Das, took as a second husband a man who was one of the Viet Minh advisers on a mission in Ratanakiri. His name is forgotten. Her maternal grandmother, Romam Phot, also remarried a man who became involved in the revolutionary struggle a few years after the death of her first husband. Phi Phuon's maternal father-in-law,

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[58] The Khmer *Issarak*, literally "Independent Khmers", also translatable as "Emancipated Khmers" or "Free Khmers". It started out as a Cambodian independence movement born under the French Protectorate in the early 1940's during World War II. It was then guided by the Thais, the Vietnamese with contrasting, even contradictory, ideologies according to some historians who prefer to speak of a constellation of revolts rather than a homogeneous movement. Despite its divisions, in any case it played a significant role in insurrectionary mobilization during the first Indochina war. In Ratanakiri, the movement bought together many people from indigenous populations. This association of men and women was largely favored by the Vietnamese Communists who trained the Issarak in guerrilla warfare, as well as in defense techniques and underground fighting. Although to date there is no solid study of the Issarak in Ratanakiri or in the rest of the country, one of the most reliable sources of general significance is found in the biography of Philip Short (2006), *Pol Pot: Anatomy of a nightmare*, New York, Holt Paperbacks, Henry Holt and Co., 537 p.

[59] Pierre-Bernard Laffont, (1963), *Coutumier de la tribu Jaraï,* Paris, École française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO), Paris/Hanoi, 318 p

[60] Viet Minh, more precisely Việt Nam Độc lập Đồng minh Hội (League for the Independence of Viêt Nam) was dissolved in 1951. Even if the use of this term occurs in all of the interviewees. Hence the decision to keep the term "Viet Minh" throughout the following text, instead of Vietnamese National army (VNA) and People's army of Viêt Nam (PAVN).

for his part, became involved in the fight against French colonialism after having worked for a few years as a warehouse worker and then as a service attaché in the French administration.

His maternal stepfather then held a French sword, an important symbol of timeless power among the Jarai, which he carefully hid.[61] Much to the disappointment of the entire extended family lineage, no one managed to find this famous sword after his death. During the whole time of the Japanese occupation during the Second World War, their troops did not penetrate Ratanakiri, but were present not far away, near the capital Pleiku of Gia Lai Province in Viêt Nam. They have been also present in some Cambodian highlands, but only in Mundolkiri Province. It was at this time that Phi Phuon's father was appointed village leader. He was responsible for recruiting fighters to prepare a response in the event of a Japanese invasion. His father's nephew, Tapang Lao, was also recruited by the Viet Minh. He married a Lao woman from Veunsai and joined the early insurgency. He died in Laos not long after from malaria.

Two other brothers of his father, who at that time worked on behalf of the French, left their position to join the anti-colonial movement. One of them, paternal uncle Neouch, could read and speak Laotian as well as Vietnamese (the Viet Minh were also present in Laos). Finally, one of Phi Phuon's younger brothers joined the armed troops of Pathet Lao (the Laotian communists) at the start of the sixties, which rose up in Champasak and began to dominate the national political scene. Phi Phuon insisted that all of these above-named people—the list of which is not exhaustive—adhered to the idea rehashed by the Viet Minh that they must remove an exogenous imperialist regime that exploited local populations and threatened to conquer their lands.

**To be born as a Jarai**

Phi Phuon, as is systematically the case with revolutionaries from the fifties and early sixties, is an assumed name, itself subject to new fluctuations according to political and eventual circumstances (change of status, location, connivance with a

[61] Jacques Dournes (1977), *Pötao, une théorie du pouvoir chez les Indochinois Joraï,* Paris, Flammarion, 365 p.

network of affiliates, reduced traceability, etc.). He would call himself Cheam before leaving the province in 1970. His original name was Rocham Tun or Vi Choeun. Rocham is the name of a clan of his mother. He is the second son of a family of nine brothers and sisters, four of whom were still living in 2015: an older brother called Rocham Tveng who benefited, and continues to benefit as we will see below, from an important status within the Jarai society having played a significant role in the insurgency movements during the sixties, a younger brother turned health officer now residing in *phum* Khsan in the southern district of O'Yadao, and two younger sisters. The other three children died early, either within the first few weeks after birth or just before reaching the age of five. His father, from the Romam clan, died in 2012 and his mother, from the Rocham clan, in 2003. Phi Phuon's maternal grandfather and his maternal great-grandfather were masters of ceremonies, that is to say venerable men, bearers of traditions, who were greatly, and most often unanimously, respected in their village and sometimes well beyond. His paternal grandfather who was a Kachoh' from a village of the same name located less than ten kilometres from the Jarai territory. Interethnic marriages were, however, not common, the preference being to marry within one's ethnic community and for the men not too far from their native places. But they remain possible, especially when the two groups such as the Jarai and the Kachoh' have the same social organization (identical clans, matrilineal descent, matrifocality), live in harmony (mutual aid, exchange of services, similar ceremonies) and in geographical proximity.

His home village, Khaet, was close to three other three Jarai villages (Yang, Chay and Tat). Further downstream and east of the Sé San were other Kachoh' and Jarai villages. The social space of each village, to use the expression of Georges Condominas[62], corresponds to a territory with more or less delimited borders which includes the zone of grouped habitat, sacred places (such as the cemetery) and inviolable forests where the spirits reside. These are places to which humans swear allegiance, as well as a forest area in which families are allowed to set up their land, hunt small and big game, and collect the multiple natural woody resources and non-timber forest products of the immediate environment.[63] *Phum*

[62] Georges Condominas (1980), *L'espace social à propos de l'Asie du Sud-Est*, Paris, Flammarion, 542 p.

[63] For a detailed study on social organization and traditional nature management, knowledge and practices, see Frédéric Bourdier (2006), *The Mountain of Precious Stones, Ratanakiri, Cambodia*, Phnom Penh, Center for Khmer Studies, 236 p.

Khaet was at this time, just before 1963, a demographically important village with some sixty nuclear families with a total of about 250 inhabitants. At its head was a traditional chief recognized by men and women for his wisdom and knowledge of customs. He was the man consulted in the event of internal conflicts or vis-à-vis the outside, the eruption of internal or external misfortune. At the same time, a chief elected by the villagers had recently been chosen to act as representative to the government. This administrative burden was established from the creation of the province in 1959. Very often, the official role was, in reality, limited to informing villagers of the decisions taken at the level of the provincial capital Lumphat. In practise the traditional chief remained the most listened to and respected man.

The effort to introduce a relay between provincial elected officials and villagers was designed not only to broaden the rural horizon but also to facilitate access to information, including times of political uncertainty given that the Viêt Nam war was commencing a few kilometres from the Cambodian Jarai region. Traditionally each village constitutes the highest social and political entity aiming, as far as possible, at autonomy. On Cambodian territory[64], there was no federation between nearby ethnic villages and even less so when they were distant. Each human settlement lived in relative autonomy and tended to favour village endogamy, even if barter and trade relations combined, long before the introduction of the piastre[65]. Using Laotian iron bars as money, they also participated in the establishment of links and inter-village alliances. Likewise, the notion of a leader, as it is usually considered in the West, with its marks of authority, leadership and delegate of domestic affairs, is quite foreign among the peoples of Ratanakiri. The traditional village leader must be good at maintaining stability within the social sub-groups that make up the village. He is expected to ensure a relative harmony, between humans and non-humans. No schools existed in the villages at this time, it was only at the end of the eighties that the first school started. The transmission of knowledge was purely oral. The Jarai language was transcribed into Latin letters in Viêt Nam by American Christian missionaries in the mid-1950s[66], but learning to

[64]Some Jarai groups in Viêt Nam developed a much more elaborate social and political organization with a hierarchical clan system and charismatic characters such as the fire, water and earth cadets whose notoriety is recognized throughout the region. Highlands. See Gérard Hickey (1982*), Sons of the Mountains: ethnohistory of the Central Highlands to 1954*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 488 p.

[65] Currency put into circulation in the former French Indochina between 1885 and 1952.

[66] Phi Phuon showed me the pamphlet written by two missionaries which, according to him, was the reference.

write it has always remained marginal in Cambodia. The Latin script was mainly used, before being abandoned in the mid-sixties, for the benefit of Lao, as we will see below, as a tool of communication between the Jarai who join in the revolutionary cause against the French, then against the Khmer soldiers of the regular army.

The traditional chief is not the only person considered important. Other wise men, usually in their prime, known for their knowledge of rituals and ceremonies as well as their ability to speak, ease tensions and mediate internal conflicts are in the eyes of the villagers considered key people. They are indispensable for maintaining social, political and religious balance. For the sake of parity, each clan in the village has its own representative. His function is not hereditary and his election is made with the approval of the community, the clan or the lineage. These men (exceptionally women) were at that time really influential in the strongest sense of the term. They were the object of the greatest respect within the village, and even outside the village limits whilst they enjoyed a reputation as prophet, shaman and recipient of knowledge of customary law. One of these wise men, also known as the master of ceremonies, could enjoy undisputed recognition among his peers and occupied a prominent place.

Phi Phuon's maternal grandfather and great-grandfather were men of this calibre. The master of ceremonies is assisted by other wise men selected so that each clan present in the village has a delegate sitting on the traditional council of elders. The socio-spatial organization of the village depends on clan affiliation. The Jarai have six clans in Cambodia and the village of Phi Phuon has four. A clan, subdivided into lineages, is an exogamous social group descended from a common mythical ancestor, perpetuated by women who pass on the name and preside over—in the literal sense of the word—each residential unit. The man is an add-on. One of his first obligations when he comes to move in with his in-laws is to learn and then submit to the prescriptions, taboos (food) and other rituals commonly in vogue in his wife's house.

In general, members of the same clan sometimes lived in a longhouse, made up of a compartment for each nuclear family, each with a space reserved for sleeping and cooking. The columns of these slender houses were made of wood, the frame is made of sturdy bamboo and the roof was sometimes covered with leaves of a plant called *khamma*, wide and resistant, sometimes covered with thin tiles made

from flattened bamboo. Some longhouses, with a lifespan of 5 to 15 years, depending on the quality of materials and changing climatic conditions, could accommodate up to 15 or 20 married couples.[67] It could be a hundred to a hundred and fifty meters long. Older couples resided at the ends while younger couples moved closer to the middle. In the centre of the longhouse, a large room with an open terrace served as a place of conviviality. It was also a meeting room where villagers and extended relatives were invited, and used for the conduct of ceremonies intended to ward off evil spirits entering the human habitat. It was materially equipped to praise the good spirits, called *va tao*, who watched over the inhabitants of the longhouse as well as the entire village. These protective spirits manifested themselves physically in the form of shiny stones that were deep yellow in colour. The ancients I talked with and who knew their origin explained that they came from residues left by lightning. Attention to "spirit stones" was not limited to the activities of human beings. To protect chickens, for example, they put the head and wings of the chicken on a plate. These parts were sprinkled with blood and then exposed in front of the *yeak tao* (male symbol) and the *ta tao* (female symbol). In addition to these spirit stones, which have, to my knowledge, now completely disappeared following incessant wars, other prestigious objects were stored in the central room. There were the loincloths and cotton blankets patiently woven by the women by hand, the jars of rice beer, the most famous of which—besides, magnificent artistic compositions bearing the memory of the ancestors—were transmitted to the maternal line as well as the precious Gongs (series of nine or twelve) from Viêt Nam considered to be invaluable.

## Early social life

### *Growing up*

The Jarai, like the Tampuan and the Kachoh', are societies in which the children live in the house of the parents of the wife. This matrilineal system is accompanied by a right of ultimogeniture conferring on the younger girl the possibility of preferentially inheriting precious objects from the extended family, on the

[67] There were still such longhouses in 2015 in some remote villages (Jarai and Kachoh') of the province but their number were already decreasing, now replaced by Khmer-type stilt houses. I wonder whether we can still have the chance to admire the architecture of such a longhouse in 2021.

condition, however, that she invests in the charge of the household affairs and that she takes care of her parents in their old age.

It is under such circumstances that Phi Phuon and his siblings grew up. Relations between boys and girls, among the Jarai as among the other indigenous populations of Ratanakiri, are quite free, he argued, in the sense that young adolescents are allowed to flirt discreetly especially when the dry season comes. That is, when parents and grandparents are busy watching the crops and stay to sleep in the farm house located in the centre of the cleared, sown, field. Attention is relaxed in the village and it is the season for love. The young boys grab their stringed instruments and individually begin to play while singing in front of the houses where the young girls reside, hoping that one of them responds to the chanting. If this is the case, provided of course that they are not from the same clan[68], the young girl can invite, although rarely on the first time, the young boy to go up to her small hut. These intimate encounters are gradual and do not always end in sexual relations. They are characterized by a long courtship during which parents discreetly encourage or discourage the relationship.

Be that as it may, the huts of the young girls are by no means frivolous places of ephemeral meeting, contrary to what has been argued many times by budding authors, journalists and laymen projecting their own fantasies.

The vast majority of young people choose their partners themselves, but all with rare exceptions seek the consent of their parents, who in some cases can impose their veto. Living together under the same roof does not necessarily depend on an officially established or even recognized union. It is not uncommon for the couple to decide to get married after living together for more than a year. Pregnancy can precipitate marriage and it must be done before childbirth, even if the girls' pregnancy is discovered late on. The Jarai age difference between the two sexes is quite narrow, and Phi Puon reports that young girls used to marry between the ages of 16 and 18 when he was himself an adolescent.

[68] If this is the case, the meeting is platonic and any sexual relation remains formally prohibited and remains punished in a ruthless manner: the young people must be banished from the village, unless expiatory rituals can take place, with the sacrifice of at least one buffalo on the side of the parents of the boy as well as on the side of the girl.

The notion of ownership, apart from the acquisition of artefacts like gongs and jars, is quite relative and remains highly subject to revision, although it does exist on certain occasions in the event of litigation. Unlike the present-day situation among these same indigenous peoples, the land was not "owned" by humans. It belonged, above all, to the spirits of the forest to whom the head of the family, anxious to find a piece of land to sow different varieties of rain fed rice and other cultivated products, asks for permission, through propitiatory anointings and sacrifices, to clear a plot of ground. The requests and answers are frequently transmitted through dreams. They are interpreted according to signs validating or invalidating the right to usufruct the land. The notion of private property title did not exist and remained, at the very least, incongruous, not only in the absence of land tenure problems in this part of the province (low population, endemic presence of fertile land) but also for cultural reasons (man's place in the universe, relationships with non-humans, allegiance to divinities). All families engaged in shifting cultivation—or swidden cultivation—without any form of ploughing and for an average of three years on the same plot of land. Terraced cultivation did not exist throughout the province. The first year was devoted to clearing and burning a section of the forest followed by the first sowing. The second saw the extension of the cultivated area with adjustment of the distribution of sowing. The third was dedicated to the enlargement of the cultivated area with the development of high stands of utility wood or fruit trees. The plot was then abandoned, less because of growing infertility but more because of an increasing amount of invasive parasitic herbs (specifically *Imperata cylindica*) that families were struggling to remove. The abandonment of the cultivation of rice does not necessarily mean forgetting the plot. Young shoots of fruit trees such as bananas, pineapple, papaya and grapefruit as well as medicinal and aesthetic plants introduced by women and men continue to grow during the forest regrowth period which lasts between ten and fifteen years. After that, a minimum of 12/15 years allowing the trees to grow again, it is always possible—with new offerings to the spirits and a request for permission from the latter—for the same family to clear the same land again. In the meantime, another plot is started, burned and then cultivated, again without uprooting the large trees which are cut with an axe at about a metre from the ground.

If temporality, mobility and rotation are characteristic features of cultivated fields, the same applies to the location of the village, which is never final. Bad events, like a deadly epidemic, a series of unexplained deaths or successive crop failures are interpreted as so many signs indicating a threatening message from the spirits of

the places demanding the abandonment of inhabited space. “The earth is burning”, peoples say metaphorically. Phi Phuon recalls that during his childhood up to the age of 15, his village moved four times, or once every three/four years on average. The decision to abandon the village, subject to dangerous influences from the spirits of the forest was each time ratified by the religious dignitary—the master of ceremonies—who decided, assisted by the Council of Elders, on the new location where the new living space must be created. Some residents may oppose the move in the new location, and it is not uncommon for villages to split into residential factions following the onslaught of misfortune, unless they take the opportunity to split up due to internal conflict. Each time they move, the new hamlet changes its name: that of Phi Phuon bore the successive names of Chak Krala, Kaun, Han Yang and finally Yabi. He remembers that any new settlement had to be situated within the social space of the original village. “We do not migrate with impunity twenty kilometres away. There are limits that should not be crossed”. Any move involved a series of oblations followed by several ritual ceremonies intended to appease the spirits of the place and to request their acquiescence in view of the establishment of the new habitat in a space previously considered to fall within the "domain of the divinities”.

From this time, Phi Phuon remembered the animal stories told by his maternal grandfather, with whom he shared his life from 12 to 15 years old, in the bamboo house located in the swidden cultivated field. These were tales relating to elephants, monkeys, hares, tigers, deer, bears and rhinos. Human and non-human beings were endowed with qualities that must be appropriate for young children: for example, men and women represent complementarity, union, fidelity and support in trials. The elephant symbolizes strength and solidarity with humans because it is he who transports the goods. The macaque is equated with agility. It represents recklessness but also malice. The owl is endowed with clairvoyance and its cry announces a bad omen. In the absence of an institutional school, learning about life was therefore carried out by passing on knowledge between generations, in particular, as regards Phi Phuon, with his mother and especially his maternal grandfather.

Still a child, that is to say before he was ten years old, he sometimes accompanied his parents in the wilderness, leaving in the morning and not returning until nightfall. Agricultural activity was in full swing between sowing and harvesting, April through to November. At this age the child was not asked by adults to work or even to help them. He spent most of his time playing with other kids, learning

about hunting, fishing and collecting non-timber forest products such as rattan, small bamboo, useful plants and edible vegetables. Despite everything, this collection was carried out under the discreet vigilance of old women who were familiar with the treasures of the forest.

As soon as he entered the period of adolescence around 11-13 years old his father and his two grandfathers began to teach him "the art of living" from the cultivation of the fields (clearing, weeding of the swidden, knowledge of seeds and identification of cultivated plants), up to the manufacture of hunting instruments (crossbow, bow, arrows) and fishing (net, line, hali hali fishing or “nivrée”[69], trap). This essential step in learning to live as a forest dweller is not only technical. Speech comes alongside gestures. The narrations of myths, epics and legends reveal the surrounding cosmogony and offered a particular interpretation of the modalities of intimate relations between human beings and other animate entities (plant, animal, ethereal). Not everything is known, everything is not necessarily understood, but interpretation, which each family assumes in its own way, is commonplace. Some stories trace the evolution of the world and point to a common origin for all the animate beings, human and non-human, who inhabit it. The differentiation between human and non-human entities comes only gradually, even, according to some myths, accidentally. Following this fortuitous separation, humans are implicitly asked to keep in mind the artificial nature of this separation. The relationship assumed between all living entities, even if it has its source in time immemorial, implies a relationship of exchange—and most often of allegiance—from which the notions of domination and control of man over nature are exempt. Not everyone has the same knowledge of this cosmogony and some even did not always respect it, especially those who were the first to forge contacts with the outside world of Marxist and Communist obedience. But among all ethnic groups it still constituted, at that time, the keystone reference of Ratanakirian culture.

From his early childhood, Phi Phuon knew, like his peers, how to make bows, crossbows and arrows essential to the hunting that any adolescent male practiced. It was repeated over and over again that he who does not know how to track animals is not a fully accomplished being. Phi Phuon also knew how to weave traps,

[69] “Nivrée” consists of poisoning all the water in a section of a small river slowly, beating an epiphytic vine in the water to release a substance toxic to fish. Nivrée is practiced in the dry season when there is less water, if possible after a pool near an area with low current. Thus, the poison is less diluted and has time to act, and it is easier to harvest the asphyxiated fish.

make baskets (the exclusive role of men, even today), build pigsties and henhouses. He was also able to participate in the construction and repair of longhouses. He remembered having two bows and three categories of arrows: the first in iron, on which poison[70] was placed, intended for big game (deer, wild pigs, etc.), the second in bamboo which could be coated with light poison, for small land game, and a third in wood or hard bamboo, intended for the slaughter of birds and small mammals such as wild roosters, turtledoves, sparrows, quail, partridges, peacocks and squirrels. The adults of his village collectively engaged in hunting for tigers and other felines dangerous to humans if the former prowled too close to the habitat or the swidden. The approach of a tiger in the vicinity of the village and *a fortiori* its passage inside the habitat were considered to be an ominous omen. It was a warning sent by the supernatural powers: the animal approaching meant that the community—or one of its members (which amounts to the same thing)—had committed a serious fault requiring redress. The arrival of the feline never occurred by chance. It was the consequence of breaking a taboo. A chain of misfortune such as a devastating epidemic or a series of unexplained deaths could follow. Both the spirits of the forest and the village members were supposed to join together for ordering the spirit of the animal to take revenge, causing disaster and physical intimidation. The tiger had to be captured and then delivered as a sacrifice in a ceremony—similar to the much more trivialized one of buffalo sacrifice—to appease the spirits.

While neighbouring populations like the Lao and Bunong of Mundolkiri Province[71] and to a lesser extent the Tampuan of Ratanakiri had men experienced in the art of domesticating wild elephants, the Jarai, notably those of the Andoung Pich District[72] where Phi Phuon lived, had developed this practice very little. At the time of his maternal grandfather, captured elephants were sometimes domesticated for carrying material, cutting trees and traveling. In the night they were locked in sturdy wooden cages, but the French prohibited the practice with the threat of fines, by means of signs (which no one knew how to decipher!). The two or three

[70] Entitled *Mesra*. It is an alcohol made from a fermented tree sap (called *megam*), the secret production of which is the prerogative of some men initiated into the practice.

[71] Jean Ellul (1983), *Le coutumier rituel des capteurs d'éléphants de l'ouest du Cambodge*, Paris, EHESS, PhD thesis in Anthropology, pp. 103-110.

[72] Three districts (Andoung Pich, Veunsai, Lumphat) already existed when the province of Ratanakiri was created. Andoung Pich's was later divided into three districts (Taveng, O'Yadao and Andong Meas). Talao commune, where Phi Phuon comes from, is now part of Andong Meas.

domesticated elephants in his village[73], as in the surrounding villages, were acquired in remote villages in exchange of domestic animals (preferably buffaloes), from an assortment of cultivars farmers could get in their cultivated fields (tobacco, cotton, seeds to be planted), all complemented by rare and sought-after products such as lacquer, wax, powders of precious wood bark, and the essential 'spirit stones'.

Phi Phuon remembered the "happy" days, as he said, when, in the company of his age-mates, they fished, put traps in the mud and drying waterholes before catching a swarming multitude of various small fish. They also set traps in the forest and near the fields to capture wild animals such as wild boar, pangolins and other small vertebrates harmful to crops. At the same time, he remembered a few painful memories when, tormented by hunger during the lean season, he had to be satisfied with each meal of a cassava tuber without salt or sugar and a few wild plants diligently collected by his grandmother. But these difficult moments were uncommon in normal time: they increased when American bombardments compelled the inhabitants to take shelter, running away, stopping their activities, rebuilding their silt-houses and reorganizing their destroyed cultivated fields. During the colder months of the year, from November to February, the lack of clothing, including traditional unbleached cotton loincloths and blankets it was uncomfortably cold during the early hours of the morning, but it was man's duty not to complain about this minor inconvenience.

Being an adult among the Jarai does not correspond to a precise age. An adolescent becomes "adult" from the moment he acquires a minimum of practical knowledge enabling him to assume decent living conditions for his future in-laws with whom he is intended to live. He must demonstrate aptitude for agricultural chores, prove his agility in the forest and show his familiarity with the non-human world. After marriage, he has the duty to be receptive to the knowledge of the cultural and religious practices of his mother-in-law belonging to a clan other than his own (ancestor worship, adhesion to his wife's food and behavioural taboos, particular familial ceremonies).

The boy must also show maturity and discernment in his ways of being in order to behave with honour and honesty in life. Adhering to these two values means knowing how to avoid two things: depending excessively on others, including those

[73] Until American bombardments made them more difficult to find from 1962-1963.

who are close to you[74] and, more than anything, being a thief. It was said over and over to the young Phi Phuon that someone who is caught with his hand in the bag stealing is destined to be shot. People took these stories to heart and were told to children to make them listen to reason. However, he remembered hearing about a more lenient sanction where the offender was tied to a tree trunk, exposed to direct sunlight, covered with red ants, and prohibited from complaining throughout the day. But the existence of a rule or a standard of decorum, as tenacious and symbolic as it is, does not necessarily mean that it is put into practice with severely evoked condemnations. The strong mention of a prohibition means above all the importance of respecting what are sociocultural ethics.

*Being a farmer*

Phi Phuon was born in a warrior clan but each member of his clan, either woman or man, was predominantly a farmer. Every Jarai family, irrespective of the clan could not be separated with the nature, a nature they belong to. Therefore, Phi Phuon, born to be a farmer, should show his relatives that he could do that properly. In a region of irregular relief such as Ratanakiri, swidden cultivation, either called slash-and-burn agriculture or rotational agriculture, is a convenient procedure by means of which it possible to develop soils of very diverse qualities and uneven pattern. In the absence of irrigation and rain water drainage, it is one of the favoured modes of developing spaces that are of difficult access, where permanent cultivation would require enormous means that are difficult to obtain, or perceived as inconceivable. It requires a minimum of technical equipment, without draught animals, without ploughs or large implements: the range of tools among the Jarai is limited to the indispensable machete, the axe with handle, the curved long-handled knife, and the digging stick. At the same time, obligations are many: overseeing the field; the dispersing of village society in the course of the agricultural cycle; certain agricultural activities are physically strenuous, for example, the felling of trees and repeated clearing and weeding, and at times

[74] Servitude is a form of extreme dependence which can result in the condition of slavery, is one of the values most despised among most indigenous populations, unless the person is physically or psychologically disabled. The same is true of people with a tendency to submit obediently, which indicates a lack of determination and personality. See also : Georges Condominas (ed.) (1998), *Formes extrêmes de dépendance. Contributions à l´étude de l´esclavage en Asie du Sud-Est*, Paris, éditions EHESS, 584 p.

dangerous, for example, burning a plot or a falling tree. The work to be done by a Jarai practicing itinerant slash-and-burn agriculture requires more time and energy than is required by rice cultivation in the Cambodian plains. While the rice field only includes a few paddy varieties, the freshly cleared ground, becoming a *miir* or a swidden field, has an agricultural richness and diversity that is at least as great, and perhaps greater than, the *chamcar* (mixed farming on the river banks) of the Khmers and the Laotians. It appears to be less orderly than a field in the plains, although there is an underlying principle in the selection of sites and spacing, but this is an indication of a remarkable agronomic diversity.[75] In short, every freshly swidden field is composed differently, favouring one or another crop alongside rice, the nutritive plant par excellence, and at least thirty plants and cultivars can be found on a single patch of land cultivated by a single family.

The Jarai, like other groups in the region, always bear in mind that the area they clear in the forest is temporary and that its future is to return to its growing-forest state. The freshly swidden field that is cultivated is called *miir*, and after having been abandoned it becomes a "mature forest", that is, a changing land where young trees are growing, until it would once more be a forest that can again be cleared. The forest is, in effect, the realm of the souls of recently deceased persons, ancestors and, above all, of spirits and god the creator. These supernatural entities, which are most often identified and localized, dwell in differentiated spaces that give rise to a genuine symbolic geography of places. An extremely rich and complex mythology explains why the supreme god, unable to himself watch over human society, created the spirits of the forest and lent them esoteric powers so that they could control the machinations of men, in particular respective of nature. Accordingly, the land traditionally belongs to no one; rather, it is temporarily borrowed to those to whom the spirits, under certain conditions, give their consent.

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[75] Rice is dominant but co-exists with tobacco, cotton, indigo, maize, manioc, millet and sesame, garlic, several kinds of sweet potatoes, gourds, cucumbers, water melons, melons and other cucurbits, small eggplants, beans, peppers, sugar cane, castor oil plants, tomatoes, numerous Zingiberaceae including culinary ginger, yams, amaranth, taro, cashew nuts, lemon grass, sweet tamarind trees, several sorts of bananas and mangoes (notably the variety *cway cianti*), pineapples, grapefruit trees, kapok trees, papaya, orange trees, lemon trees, without counting the many local plants with domestic, artisanal, medical, ritual, dying, decorative and aesthetic (flowers) uses and a few majestic bamboos in the shoals.

The different agricultural activities follow an invariably respected chronological order. Work begins in December/January with the search for a site. It is completed in late November or early December with the arrival of the monsoon. The agricultural season begins in the dry season and comes to an end after the rains have subsided. Every family has a margin of freedom in deciding, within the limits of climatic conditions, as to the organization of working time and the management of its field. This feature, which is expressly claimed, is more than a perceived advantage: it is the expression of a way of life in which the relation to time is not experienced as a constraint, but rather as a "predisposition"; work is not an end in itself, an unavoidable necessity, but a manner in which to apprehend life and to enter into a continual relation with the encompassing natural milieu. When a festival takes place in the village or in a neighbouring field, nothing prevents attendance and work that has begun is postponed to the next day or the day after that.

The choice of a site takes two factors into account: a terrain that is agronomically suitable and a place where the spirits of the forest accept human intrusion. These two considerations may appear to be independent of each other, but in reality they are one. The logic of the Jarai and other highlanders does not discern nature as an autonomous sphere in which the presence of man is only perceivable through his knowledge of it. Our naturalist view does not preclude thinking that the phenomena occurring in nature are closely linked to human activities. For, in indigenous cosmology, there is a continuum between human beings and beings in nature (spirits of the forest, plants, minerals) and the life of one cannot be enacted without relation to the other. Furthermore, any land that can be potentially cleared, even should other prohibitions be imposed on it, is a place where supernatural entities dwell and participate in the order of the world and its shaping, its fertility. The spaces where clearing has not been envisaged (for example, those covered with sparsely wooded forest and savannah), on the other hand, are devoid of any "supernatural" presence and, consequently, are unproductive.

Decisions taken concerning the appropriate site are not the result of chance and are subject to lively discussions that at times include not only the concerned family but the "respected men" of the clan or, in the case of indecisiveness or contention, the headman of the village. At Phi Phuon's village, every residential unit has its swidden field in a perimeter, the orientation of which depends on the spatial

position of the unit in the village. This is the first framework (a lineage area within the social environment of the village) within which each nuclear family traditionally chooses its own site. There follows a converging of the swidden fields belonging to the enlarged family: to the spatial proximity of individual houses gravitating around the main house within the residential unit thus corresponds a spatial proximity of swidden field of the same nuclear families related by maternal lineages. These individual *miir* are seldom occupied by a single tenant and are clearly separated by bushes, forest or thickets, thereby giving the cultivated landscape a particular configuration in the form of clearings in the forest cover. Each wooden and bamboo house in the *miir* is therefore a place of passage and sociability where the families can stop on their way, rest and refresh themselves, enter into discussions; for the same reasons as proximity facilitates mutual assistance in domestic and agricultural tasks when certain activities must be accomplished in a short time (burning, weeding, etc.).

The forest adjoining and encircling the village—where cattle go to graze and where women and children gather diverse forest products, where the graveyard is located—is exempt from any cultivation. The freshly swidden fields are thus situated beyond this traditionally "protected" zone, extending over a radius of several hundred meters. This security barrier of forest is to be found in most villages on the plateau, unless the reduction or limitation of available territory forces the villagers to encroach upon it[76]. A portion of these wooded areas constitutes sacred forests where spirits dwell and are precincts where trees cannot be cut without incurring their displeasure. One must nevertheless acknowledge that the inviolability of these forests or of specific trees can be subject to reinterpretation, and ceremonies have been described to us that were intended to "remove the spirits" who have become overly obstructive and prevent any human activity.

The search for land to be cleared is not undertaken at the last moment, nor is it spontaneous. In the course of wandering from place to place in the forest, there has been time to compare several places and to locate a site that seems to be adequate in terms of physical, edaphic, pedological but also immaterial parameters, for one must not offend the spirits of the place. Invisible by essence,

[76] Nowadays, this is a phenomenon that appears mainly in the Jarai settlements located along the trails suitable for traffic or near lands dominated by the Khmers

the spirits can assume an animal appearance or an anthropomorphic form in dreams. To obtain their consent or refusal, a common ceremony consists in clearing a small patch of forest and waiting for the spirit(s) to manifest through interpretable signs. Various divination rituals are at the same time considered to ensure what is presumed to be a good choice. Once the pact has been concluded, the new occupant takes symbolic and material possession of the land. Moreover, to establish oneself temporarily or for a longer period in a place signifies *de facto* the commitment to perform several ceremonies in the course of the agricultural cycle.

The clearing of a new forest plot represents the longest and most arduous labour. But, it is not the most onerous for all highlanders—either Jarai, Kachoh', Brao, Lun or Tampuan—who prefer a strenuous effort, but one which is much more prestigious for the man who can flaunt his virility, to a work that exhausts through monotony, such as weeding, a task willingly left for the women and adolescents. Prior to any clearing activity, each family must symbolically receive the usufruct of the land. This is a special ceremony invariably made in the *miir* itself, intended to appease the spirits of the forest, to ward them off, to prevent that accidents occur when the trees are felled. An animal is sacrificed, a jar of rice beer is opened and members of the enlarged family are invited. In Jarai language, the commonly used word literally means a prayer, a field, a reserved place. Several invocations are made to ancestors and spirits to the purpose of informing them of the impending human intentions. The spirits of the forest are called upon to leave for more distant places and not to thwart the projects to be undertaken. The plot is then marked out by making notches in trees and placing green branches crosswise so as to signify the site. This ceremony is followed by prohibitions to fell trees in the vicinity or to work in the fields the next day.

The period for felling average and large-sized trees, without uprooting the stumps, extends over four to eight weeks, with numerous breaks. Children do not participate in that work but Phi Phuon reminded that as an adolescent, about 14 year-olds, he started being involved. There is no hurry and the men can use the time from the end of December to the end of March to complete this work. No other agricultural activity takes place during this time, if not the gathering of tubers

and the manioc from formerly swidden fields. The felling most often begins in a joyous atmosphere: the days are not too hot, it is festival time in the village and the recent harvest provides ample food. Festivities, rest and work—in which men, women and children take part—follow one upon the other and the solidarity among the villagers is particularly heightened in this period in which social ties are intensified and symbolic links between man and nature are renewed. The large annual village ceremonies are held in this period; one or several buffaloes are sacrificed, rice beer and alcohol are shared, the fermentation of which is compared to the process of cosmic transformation of earthly and celestial waters. In preparing and then consuming the beer, the men and women accomplish a sacred act and participate in the advent of the rains, thus in the taming of nature.

The burning takes place with the help of relatives and neighbours, even sometimes with non Jarai people like Laotians, but without elaborate ritual ceremony. The borders are cleared a bit more in order to ensure the effectiveness of the firebreak, and tension is to be sensed in the team at work. At the end of the day, the centres of the fire extinguish little by little and the participants return soot-covered to their homes, at times reassured by the way things went, at times disheartened by the difficult prospects of having to rekindle the small fires in the unburnt places. A work prohibition in connection with religious matters will be respected the next day. When the ashes are cold, the family completes the burning if it was partial, then proceeds to clear the land. Several ceremonies can take place, the most important of which is the anointing with blood-soaked rice (an ointment made of seeds) that consecrates the end of the preparations of the *miir* and the beginning of rice germination. After this, the different plots of the *miir* are very attentively examined so as to decide the distribution of the cultivated species.

The Jarai and the other highlanders in Ratanakiri collect rice varieties. It should be observed that such a concept of diversification is contrary to the idea of the exclusive employment of a limited number of cultivars selected for their high yield in optimal conditions. The different categories of rice are subdivided into early and late varieties, which make it possible to lengthen the harvests (end of August to beginning of December). Each of the varieties also corresponds to a more or less

desired consistence and taste[77]. For instance, the preferred rice among the Tampuan (and that of the ancestors, for its texture and flavour) is *vang*, but it is unfortunately more contingent upon the vagaries of nature because it requires greater and more regular rainfall than other rice varieties. The Jarai are also having a preferred rice, but different from the *vang* of the Tampuan. Some said, on both sides, it is better to avoid the 'preferred rice' of the other group because it can cause infortune and disease. The lengthening of the harvest time together with the diversity of chosen varieties increases the chances of having a minimum harvest in spite of the unfavourable climatic conditions. One of the reasons for which several varieties are maintained is thus to obtain rice with varying maturities. In 1994, the late varieties were damaged because of the lack of rain after September, but the early varieties received sufficient water in July and August to allow of an acceptable harvest.

Every nuclear family has its own seed reserves stored from the previous year in the loft of its house on the swidden field. Rice can produce several flower-heads from a single seed, which is of importance to the peasants of the forest in Ratanakiri, who avail of lean surpluses and judge their harvests less in terms of yield per area than in the multiplication of seeds planted. The sowing season represents a neuralgic point and a complete ethno-meteorological forecasting system has been developed for this occurrence. In this same period, a number of taboos are enjoined to preclude that the behaviour of the people would upset the unfolding of time and the seasons. Here again, the social order and the designs of nature are not viewed separately; the degradation of the former runs counter to the generally advantageous course of the latter. Following the sacrifice made before sowing, which consists in libations to the rice seeds and tools, the interdiction to work the next day on the *miir* is observed. The time for sowing is a collective decision made by the family and is quickly done by a team using digging sticks to make the seed holes. The men pace up and down the field, regularly driving the stick in the ground; the women follow, sowing a handful of seed in each hole. During the period when rice and other crops are sown, the *miir* house is built with an integrated loft. The

[77] Fifteen varieties were counted among the Kaveth, while Jacqueline Matras (op. cit. 1983) listed some forty in her Brao village. Nevertheless, according to the Jarai, some villagers had previously no more than five varieties (three early and two late varieties), although they would be capable of naming three times as many. Each variety has its place on the freshly swidden field according to the quality of the soils and their texture and, above all, the year when the plot was cultivated.

craftsmanship of this bamboo house is remarkable; it is often more spacious, has a better layout and is maintained better than the village house. The field is protected by a rudimentary fence made of branches saved from the felling. Traps for small wild animals and enclosures and wickets for straying livestock are carefully deployed in the forest adjacent to the *miir* and around the house (for chickens and pigs).

A nutritious plant, especially the symbolic equivalent of the *vang* variety, is a sacred plant. A number of myths explain the circumstances in which it was given to men by the primordial god. Like the sowing, the heading period prior to the monsoon entails numerous rites and interdictions. It is not only a question of protecting the crops both materially and ritually. The rice ceremony is performed in two stages. The first one, which is a ceremony for the young rice sprouts, occurs in the ninth month of the Jarai calendar (seventh month in our solar calendar) when the paddy stalks have grown to a height of fifty centimetres. It is then that the stalk is at full growth and the paddy begins to ripen, in particular the *vang* variety. The plant is sprinkled (fertility rite) and its soul is retained by offering food gifts (chickens, rice beer, etc.) as well as by attaching unbleached cotton strings to the plants. The second stage, which is a ceremony for the rice harvest, takes place just before the end of the harvest. When the paddy has reached maturity, but before the final harvesting, a few sheaves are cut to prepare *ambok* (roasted rice that is still green). Subsequent to threshing and pounding, the rice thereby gathered is offered to the ancestors at full moon. This ritual, described in other societies and found among both the Laotians and the Khmers, can be interpreted as a rite of abundance.

After further gathering by women, old men and children, the harvest properly speaking is carrying out, spread nevertheless over several months. The hulling of the paddy takes place at a very moderate pace, becoming more intense when the late varieties are harvested in October and November. Once the paddy has been harvested, separated, dried and stored in the field house, a closing ceremony ends the last day of work in the fields: a chicken is sacrificed, a jar of rice beer is opened and offerings are made to the soul of the paddy so that the harvest does not decay in the silos. With this celebration, the agricultural cycle has come to an end. The woman returns from time to time to the field to collect cotton and a few other plants, while the man goes back and forth transporting the daily ration of rice from the *miir* to the village. The harvest is thus left without supervision in the field, so

inconceivable is the theft of rice. To steal someone else's harvest is held as the gravest of offences and can entail ostracism, not to speak of the torment caused the culprit by the soul of the rice, for as the local proverb says, "he who steals harms himself".

All the elders from the village of Phi Phuon confirm that, at that time, three successive years of rice cultivation on the same plot represents a minimum average in most Jarai villages. Six years at the most could be possible, depending on the characteristics of the soil, although this is not very common. The length of time is also dependent of the slope, and steeply-inclined plots are sooner abandoned. In the surrounding villages, the periods of use of one and the same plot are identical. The abandonment of *oryza* cultivation does not however mean the abandonment of all other crops, even if in the sixties neither monocrop nor plant for commercial purposes such as cashew nut, cassava, coffee, sunflower and rubber tree were grown afterwards. However, some of long-standing plants, such as sesame, tobacco and, mostly, fruit trees like papaya, pineapple, jackfruit, orange, lemon, guava and, last not least, various varieties of bananas were commonly available. Main thing is that at during that period not a single *miir* was converted to a small plantation, like nowadays in 2023.

*On the way to radical changes*

Such an original and elaborated relation between human beings and nature will soon about to be challenged after the late 1960s by the revolutionaries. Traditional land-use patterns as well as agricultural practices of indigenous peoples' lands will therefore be destined to undergo profound changes. Under these circumstances, local ancestral knowledge could not be integrated at all into the future agrarian project. Cambodia's new rulers will be, above all, interested in agricultural development. Countrywide yields of seven tons per hectare will be envisaged. The aim consists in intensifying rice production so that the future Democratic Kampuchea can be self-sufficient (not only with rice), so that it will be no longer dependent on neighbouring and faraway countries. Leaders will not hesitate to claim they wanted surpassing the yields of more advanced countries such as Japan and the Punjab region of northern India. Ratanakiri, with its red basaltic soils, considered as an epicentre of the burgeoning revolution at that time by the leaders,

could not be left out of this grandiose and utopian project, despite its hilly relief, which hardly facilitated the establishment of vast irrigated rice-growing as it can be theoretically and realistically possible in the plains region. For almost four years throughout the country, plus a further five years (from mid-1970 to mid-1975) in Ratanakiri Province, the new agricultural policy will undergo profound upheavals, in terms of both the organization of work and the techniques adopted. Implemented as early as March 1970 in already Khmer Rouge-controlled areas, the political and administrative structure of the future Democratic Kampuchea will be applied imperturbably, even if remote areas in the extreme north-eastern part of Ratanakiri province, such as the one where Phi Phuon's family lived, will be relatively spared. This zone will past the worst mostly due to the lack of expected intransigent control and 'overly' sympathetic human support, whenever cadres and security guards were also from ethnic minorities. Everywhere else, peasants, shopkeepers, civil servants, intellectuals, men, women, children and valid old age persons will be assigned to work in the rice fields and/or on irrigation construction sites. Peasants categorized by the *Angkar* as 'ancient people', like all the indigenous peoples living in more than half the country's provinces, will also be assigned to work. As we will see later for Ratanakiri, they will be among the first to experience the bitterness of the forced labour camp. Apart from chiefs and soldiers, there will be mostly agricultural workers left. The population of Ratanakiri Province prior to 1970 already included a large majority of peasants, but their numbers will increase immediately afterwards, mainly because of the recruitment of young children, teenagers and as many able-bodied elderly people as possible.

While the main expectation of *Angkar*'s political leaders will be to improve yields and increase production, local administrative officials will be in charge of setting up work groups, planning the land registry and innovating in the technical field. The work groups will include mobile brigades, people affiliated to cooperatives, semi-sedentary groups and local *kamaphibal* cadres who, along with their soldiers, will enjoy preferential treatment (food, rest, health care)[78]. This slightly 'privileged' group of supervisors will direct and orient work in the villages and communes. However, Marine Alexandre Martin points out that, with the increase in the

[78] For further details at the national level, see : Viviane Frings (1997), *Le socialisme et le paysan cambodgien. La politique agricole de la République Populaire du Kampuchéa et de l'Etat au Cambodge*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 189 p.

number of rice growers, one might have expected a correlative increase in the total cultivated area, but according to official statements by Khmer Rouge representatives in the late seventies, this will not be the case: it will remain more or less the same as before, at around two and a half million hectares in 1970[79].

[79] Marine Alexandre Martin (1981), la riziculture et la maîtrise de l'eau dans le Kampuchéa démocratique, *Etudes rurales*, 83, pp. 7-44.

# Chapter 2

## NEW SMELLS

Before all these radical changes in agricultural practices occurred, unexpected incursions started percolating. It was in 1962. At the beginning, sounds. Heavy sounds coming from the sky, similar to a thunder. But, unlike it, these sounds were having confusing expressions of repeating crashes and resonances, coming back again and again. Then, silence; for a while. Followed by smoke; a thick and unpleasant smoke. Not like the one coming from the familiar fireplace. And soon after, new-fangled smells.

The new smells are, according to local understanding in the sixties, the new sensations that are discovered in the living environment. They are not considered as aromas per se. They occasionally materialize, but they are said to be mostly sniffed. Occasionally, we can even see them. "The smell of the outside" is a colourful expression used from the sixties by the ethnic groups of Ratanakiri to designate the three main forms of outside intrusion. Namely the Khmer colonization, the Vietnamese penetration and the American bombardments: the smell of the Khmer soldiers in uniform, the smell of the Viet Minh cuisine and the smell of explosions. The vernacular representation did not foresee making an amalgam of them. The only common point due to the new character of these sounds, these exhalations and these exogenous images, detectable by scent, was that the sight and noise which came from them[80] was likely to upset the pre-existing order supposed to guarantee the serene continuity of the cycle of life. Without the immutability of things and essences indicative of well-being the

[80] Every noise is accompanied by a form of materiality and a smell, even if the latter two remain imperceptible.

change in its general formulation was a potential object of curiosity and renewal among indigenous populations. It was still necessary to give it meaning.

**First contacts and warning signs of conflict**

Looking back, more than fifty years after leaving the world of adolescence and just before entering the armed struggle, Phi Phuon remained conflicted concerning the living conditions he had known since birth. On the one hand, he remembered, with undisguised emotion, the feeling of freedom that he and his peers enjoyed. He evoked with nostalgia a privileged historical time when it was still possible to live from day-to-day without being aware—he repeated a sentence that he must have heard repeated again and again by communist colleagues and Khmer Rouge cadres and executives "because we were ignorant"—of the dramatic development of contemporary political depravity. War was brewing on both sides, starting in Vietnam, but the information remained diluted and hardly percolated the depths of the thick forest. Living in a village relatively cut off from the world reinforced the feeling of belonging to what was commonly called a 'real village community' in which the notions of solidarity, mutual aid and sharing of a common identity constituted strong values as well as conditions of existence. As he explained to me, with a vengeance, and as he remembered, if a family ran out of food or needed help to maintain its land, the extended kinship systematically provided for its needs, without establishment of a debt system but with the tacit agreement of mutual assistance.

At the same time, this life of men and women "free in the forest", as it was formulated by Gérard Hickey[81] about the Jarai and other ethnic minorities of the highlands of Vietnam, was far from idyllic. Contingent living conditions remained prone to the risk of food shortages, disease and the intrusion of dangerous animals such as snakes, tigers and other felines. There was also a kind of latent mistrust between distant villages. One of the major traumas among the local population in Cambodia was rooted in the slave trade which persisted in Ratanakiri during the first decades of the twentieth century, despite its ban under the French

[81] Gérard Hickey (1982), *Free in the Forest. Ethnohistory of the Vietnamese Central Highlands 1954-1976*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press.

protectorate.[82] The Jarai people were feared by other ethnic groups from Viêt Nam (Rhadhes, Mnong) as well as in Cambodia (Brao, Tampuan). Along with the ethnic Stieng living in Mundolkiri Province, there were said to be accomplices of Khmer, Laotian and Thai slave hunters.

A large part of the Jarai former region, nowadays corresponding the Vietnamese highands, became part of Laos in 1893 and Annam in 1904. Cambodia, on the other hand, welcomed the Jarai in 1907, and the latter be in position to settle at the very eastern part of Ratanakiri. While Cambodians facing prosecution took refuge in the Jarai areas on the other side of the border, the Jarai were also able to take refuge in Cambodia. Until the reign of King Norodom I (1860 –1904), non-Khmer populations represented a potential cornucopia of slaves sought after privately or for public utility works.[83] Indications provided by archaeologists tend to show that the builders of the Angkor temples made extensive use of this indigenous labour force. Evidence suggests that these builders instituted a system of forced recruitment that extended east of the Mekong River and beyond the current borders of Thailand, Laos and Vietnam.[84] Other ethnic groups, such as the Kuy of the North Centre, specialized in ironworking and are believed to have been the main suppliers of bladed weapons to the Khmer Empire.[85] Later, from the 18th century, the Lao de Champassak, vassals of the Kingdom of Siam, and to a lesser extent Vietnamese mercenaries forged alliances and incited indigenous populations, notably the Jarai, to carry out raids on neighbouring peoples (Tampuan, Brao, Lun, Kaveth) in return for financial and honorary reward. The Jarai villagers of Cambodia were spared from these raids, but Jarai men were recruited as mercenaries on behalf of Laotian and Vietnamese commanders in search of

[82] Mathieu Guérin, Andrew Hardy, Nguyen Van Chinh and Stan Tan Boon Hwee (2003), *From mountain people to ethnic minorities*, Paris / Bangkok, L'Harmattan / IRASEC, pp. 142-146.

[83] The modalities of human trade are mentioned in a royal ordinance dating from 1621. See Khin Sok (1998), Slavery in Cambodia in the Middle Era through the Codes, Modern Angkor Inscriptions and Royal Chronicles, in Georges Condominas (1998), *Formes extrêmes de dépendance in Asia,* Paris, EHESS, p. 315. In the same collective work, Alain Forest indicates that the codes relating to slavery cite the ethnic origin of the inhabitants of the high plateaus of the north-east, wrongly considered as primitives that the merchants of men can raid at will in order to resell them to the king or to any other particular notable (*op. cit.,* pp. 344-345).

[84] Information provided by Christophe Pottier from the French School of the Far East (Ecole française d'extrême-Orient: EFEO) in Siem Reap, June 2006.

[85] Bernard Philippe Groslier (1973), Pour une géographie historique du Cambodge, *Les Cahiers d'Outre-mer* 104 (26): pp. 337-379; Mitch Hendrickson, and Oliver T. Price (2011), *Industries of Angkor project: Iron Kuay,* March 2010 Field Campaign Report, University of Sydney, 22 p.

slaves. Some of the Brao people of Taveng district, whom I met in their villages in 2015, still remember the Jarai incursions in some villages, without being able to provide me with precise dates and places where these confrontations took place. Old persons still have in memory the bloody battles that were fought against some groups of Jarai who temporarily became slave hunters.[86] The captured men were doomed to be drafted into the Siamese army then at war with the powerful Burmese army, while the women and children were sold as servants and the young elegant girls as concubines in local markets like the well-known one based in Siem Pang in Steung Treng Province, some fifty kilometres northwest of Veunsai. Faced with this threat, many non-Jarai villages were fortified with palisades made of sharp bamboo. The men in their prime from these villages mobilized with their weapons (spears, crossbows, sharp knives) and others were assigned to patrol the forest in order to systematically spot and slaughter unwanted marauders. Phi Phuon did not experience these moments of latent warfare, but he heard of them many times in his youth. The traumatic memory lasted long after these manhunts were over, and continued to elicit a pervasive sense of insecurity passed down from generation to generation, as if something could suddenly re-emerge again and again. The feeling of mistrust experienced by the Jarai, who sided with the attackers instead, was more related to the fear of being further stigmatized by the risk of possible revenge from the descendants of the persecuted.

Insecurity, mixed with a diffuse feeling of anxiety linked to the loss of control over traditional lifestyles[87], intensified from the end of the 1950's with the attachment of the province to the Kingdom of Cambodia and the arrival of hostile military ground and air forces. Due to its location, Ratanakiri began to transform itself into a theatre of confrontation of hegemonic and geopolitical struggles where the first

[86] A forty-year-old Brao man from the northern district of Taveng testifies to the resentment he still felt, in 2015, with regard to the Jarai who did not cease to carry out roundups on the shores of the Sé San River in the time of his great-grandparents. For historical sources, see: Gérard Van Wusthof (1871), Voyages lointains aux royaumes du Cambodge et Laouwen et ce qui s'est passé jusqu'en 1644 (annotated by F. Garnier), *Bulletin of the geographical society*, 2 (6), pp. 249-304.

[87] This openness to the world, or at least to part of the world, is an unprecedented phenomenon. However, it should be noted that speeches are frequent, especially among indigenous revolutionaries like Phi Phuon, to recognize that such an openness is necessary in order to emerge from an isolation that distances them from other civilizations and excludes them from any social progress.

communist dissidents, the Royal Army, Viet Minh troops as well as certain Khmer *Issarak* of indigenous origin converged.

**The earliest setbacks with the furtive arrival of the French and the Khmer administration**

As far as Phi Phuon rightly remembers, the Royal Army arrived from 1954 onwards. They started launching military operations in various places for controlling the political situation and driving away the Viet Minh forces. They were more keen to show up during the dry-season, because roads were unpractical during the rainy season. Viet Minh were tougher and could adjust anytime, at least much less embarrassed by physical and material constraints. Some ethnic groups had been preferably selected to join the Royal force, mostly those living in the central plateau where the main Khmer battalion was just located. Highlander villages, and especially young guys, were particularly frightened of the Royal Army. That was the general state of mind in the region when Phi Phuon was himself and adolescent. It was in effect very common for bachelors to escape in the forest and even, if they could, to join the Viet Minh who treated them with respect, contrary to the Sihanouk soldiers who had a brutal reputation. In addition, Vietnamese highlanders (Jarai, Halang, Kachoh', Sedang, Rhades…) had been recruited by the Viet Minh and it enabled a mutual trust. Facing the unpredictably of the Cambodian forces, young girls were terrified to be caught by the soldiers and later us to become 'service women' for their inmates, while the young men were concerned to be enrolled by force in the Royal Army. Another targeted group was composed by the early administrators (*mephum, mekhum* and their associates, plus the few Khmer teachers) and some old people who we were asked to stay close to the army, and eventually act as informants, in exchange of services and advantages. Such a deal apparently did not work frequently and it was common for this category of persons to play a double game (behaving as if they were supporting the government and using this strategy in order to know the in and out of the still embryonic Royal administration). On the other hand, Phi Phuon and other interviewed highlanders have been all adamant to enlighten that if some ethnic minorities were involved in the Royal Army and became complicit of the first Cambodian government since

Norodom Sihanouk became the King, most of them would have preferred to avoid it but have accepted for fear of reprisals.

The government of the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* (Popular Socialist Society) established by Prince Norodom Sihanouk from the end of the fifties began to administer the new province. Serious blunders occurred right from the start. In his thesis on political sociology, Sacha Sher writes that “In 1959-1960, the governor, Thung Nhâch, had committed countless brutalities in order to rob the mountain dwellers [the indigenous populations] of the land necessary for planting (...). In 1962, the French Ambassador in Phnom Penh had already reported that the Cambodians were giving the inhabitants of Mundolkiri and Ratanakiri “a thousand little annoyances”, while attempting to convert them to the state religion, Buddhism”. Government representatives went so far as to "tear off their pendants” by wounding them in their ears, to deny village chiefs the weapons necessary for self-defence with which France had always provided them".[88]

Sihanouk, a more skilful diplomat, visited the province in person and distributed Khmer-made gifts and delivered honeyed speeches. He had a small palace built near the enchanting Yak Lom lake, near the present-day provincial capital Ban Lung. Notwithstanding, he affirmed his paternalistic plan to assimilate the ethnic minorities, now called *Khmer Loeu* (Khmer from above), into the general Khmer population. Moreover, from a socio-anthropological point of view, the first term in the expression ‘*Khmer Lœu’*, adopted by the Sihanoukist administration in the late 1950s, is misleading insofar they do not constitute a ‘pure race’. Some claimed in the past, without any real proof, that the indigenous peoples of the North-East had been mixed with "very ancient invaders, driven back by the Khmers (...) to the periphery"[89]. More recent investigations in anthropology[90] as well as in ethnogenetic[91] tend to show that the opposite is true: everything suggests that the

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[88] Sacha Sher (2004), *The Rise of Angkar (1945-1975*): 136 [accessed February 2016: http://www.lulu.com/shop/sacha-sher/lessor-de-langkar/ebook/product- 17482263.html]. The source of the author’s quote is from the archives of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

[89] Rémy Prud'homme (1969), *L'économie du Cambodge*, Paris, la Découverte, 300 p.

[90] Frédéric Bourdier, Maxime Boutry, Jacques Ivanoff & Olivier Ferrari (2015), *From Padi States to Commercial States: Reflections on Identity and the Social Construction of Space in the Borderlands of Cambodia, Vietnam, Thailand and Myanmar* Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, Global Asia*, (*International Institute for Asian Studies: IIAS), 168 p.

[91] Goky Ly, Frédéric Bourdier, Romain Laurent, Bérénice Alard, Sophie Lafosse, Bertrand Toupance, Chena Mondarin, Gerard Diffloth, Olivier Evrard, Samuel Pavard & Raphaëlle Chaix

indigenous Austro-asiasiatic peoples living on the northern periphery of the Cambodian Kingdom are affiliated to the Khmer of the plains, from which they separated probably before or during the apogee of the Khmer empire, while others, such as the Jarai and the Kachoh', came in recent times from the Annamite chain.

Even in the recent times, if highlanders are asked what they think of the appellation "Khmer Loeu", they usually answer: “This is better than names we were given before. We were called *kha*, others called us *Phnom* or even *moi*”, all pejoratives nicknames associated with ‘slave’ and ‘primitive’ designations. Not all are of this opinion; several Kaveth were offended by this name and expected to be called by their ethnic name. Jarai, Brao and Tampuan feelings in this regard seemed to range from indifference to acceptance. One often obtains the answer that the designation Khmer Loeu only means Khmer living in the highlands and that there is hardly anything to say against that, because they really do live in the north and in the highlands. As for the employment of the term ‘Khmer’, indigenous men and woman told us that this expressed the concern of the government and lowland peoples to consider them as their brothers. Thus, contrary to what one might think, the meaning given to this appellation appears not to be pejorative or alienating and is relatively tolerated, at least in appearance. In some extreme cases, autochthonous people who manifest their intention to get closer to Khmers, to live among them or even to migrate to another province, are perhaps those who most adamantly reject the epithet “Khmer Loeu”, to hide their origins. A Bunong woman from Mundolkiri Province told us that her children, soldiers in Phnom Penh, pretended to be Khmers to avoid mocking remarks from their colleagues.

Whatever their origin which was not a real concern at that time, an assimilation process was strongly encouraged. At the local level, a chief, briefly trained in administrative management techniques but rarely knowing how to read or write Khmer or even speak it correctly, was appointed as the head of each village. He was

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(2019), From matrimonial practices to genetic inbreeding patterns in Southeast Asian populations: the signature of the matrilineal puzzle, *Philosophical Transactions B*, 375(1801): pp. 231-250; Raphaëlle Chaix, Frédéric Bourdier, Gok Ly, Romain Laurent, Bérénice Alard, Sophie Lafosse, Bernard Toupance, Chena Monidarin, Gérard Diffloth, Olivier Evrard & Samuel Pavard (2020), Structures sociales et structures génétiques dans les populations humaines Social Structures and Genetic Structures in Human Populations, *Bulletins de la Société d'Anthropologie de Paris* : pp. 1-6. DOI 10.3166/bmsap-2020-0071

assisted by two aides who later constituted the village council. The entity above the village was the commune (*khum*) which assembled three to five villages together on average. Then there was the district (*srok*) and above that the provincial headquarters (*kaet*) established on the banks of the Sré Pok River in the new small southern town of Lumphat.[92] Each of these administrative units had its bureaucrats, most often Khmers with little knowledge of, or interest in, local customs.

A small military garrison was, in principle, assigned by the Ministry of Defence to each commune. However, remote places, in particular in the extreme north-east of the province such as those on the eastern shore of Andoung Pich, frequently did not have such units. Health posts were non-existent in forest areas. The only school worthy of the name, apart from the one in the capital Lumpath, was based in Bokeo which was almost a three-day walk from Phi Phuon's village. During the sixties, this educational institution remained reserved for the children of new Khmer, Chinese, Laotian and Vietnamese settlers from Steung Treng and the southern provinces of the country. These newcomers were encouraged to settle in the province in order to introduce a 'Khmerized' lifestyle and promote national integration by imposing, in the literal sense of the word, a more modern and rational way of life. The first directive, seen as one of the spearheads for the economic future of the nation, aimed to adopt Cambodian agriculture as developed in the plains.

The French, however, were barely present in this remote and reputedly dangerous region (a forest area devoid of any modern infrastructure, hyper-endemic malaria, with the presence of rebellious Jarai with a belligerent reputation). They had already tried, unsuccessfully, to ban swidden agriculture, (wrongly) considered unprofitable and destructive.[93] They tried in vain to institute the *corvée* system[94] in a few villages in order to encourage the inhabitants to participate in the construction of roads and public structures but the Khmer representatives of the

[92] A road, now abandoned, linked the province of Kratie (where the Mekong River passes) to Lumphat. Information given to the author in 2009 by the historian Michael Vickery, Chiang Mai (Thailand), who took this road in the early 1960s with his 2CV car.

[93] Mathieu Guérin (2009), State Policy toward the Highlanders of Ratanakiri during the French Protectorate, *in* Frédéric Bourdier (ed.), *Development and Dominion*, Bangkok, White Lotus, pp. 133-136.

[94] The *corvée* system consists in requiring a few days of voluntary work (in fact "forced work") for the purpose of land use planning. It also acts as a tax on a population without financial liquidity.

French protectorate were very quickly forced to abandon this taxation project in the face of refusal, and sometimes of rebellion (destruction of offices, threats to officials), of the indigenous population. A few private entrepreneurs with subtler behaviour were, nevertheless, present, like those who, with the help of the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* government, contributed to the construction of the first provincial airport in Bokeo. Notably the Lyonnais, Georges Bonzon, ran the first rubber plantation of Labansiek, near the current provincial capital Ban Lung, and of which the majority of the stake belonged to the Cambodian State.

If the "civilizing mission" of the French, to use the expression of the historian Mathieu Guérin, hardly had any repercussions locally in the medium term, the impact of the progressive arrival of the Khmers of the plains, followed by the installation of the Royal Cambodian army, was different. In the early 1960s, Ratanakiri was the subject of relentless government propaganda. It was necessary to populate the whole of the territory, starting with the abandoned banks of the two rivers (the Sé San in the north and the Sré Pok in the south) as well as the interfluvial zone which had rich basaltic soils. It was time to show the "primitive" indigenous what could be done with improved technical means and agricultural practices perceived to be more "rational" than the said beliefs and superstitions of the forest peasants. Rice cultivation was encouraged along the vast peneplains which adjoin the riparian ecosystem. Land was not lacking at this time, and plots of land were allocated to the new Khmer settlers, most of whom were landless peasants from the overcrowded southern provinces of Takeo and Svay Rieng.[95.]

The province also attracted Chinese, Khmer, Sino-Khmer and Vietnamese traders who had heard about the richness of the natural environment and its quality woods, in particular the famous rosewood (*kraniuom*). Members of the Kolar ethnic group from northern Burma, specialists in the search for precious minerals, came to settle around the town of Bokeo and the hamlets of Bo Kham, Bo Nhok and Bo

[95] Unlike the Laotian peasants who were able to adapt to local living conditions, most Khmer peasants found themselves confronted with health problems (malaria, yaws, typhoid fevers, etc.), agricultural difficulties (plowing equipment as well as the promised inputs. by the government never happened) and cultural problems (as elsewhere, the forest was considered the refuge of evil spirits). Such circumstances prompted a large part of the Khmer families to migrate again to settle in the present western district of Kon Mum with its deciduous forests and its gently rolling terrain. Such an ecosystem corresponded more to the preferential criteria of the Cambodians of the plains for the development of the land.

Lay. Mining developed rapidly, but the dominant semi-precious stone turned out to be not gold but zircon[96], a brown stone that is little coveted and of low economic value.

Following the, sometimes unwelcome, arrival, of the Khmer peasants from the plains, and especially in view of the attempts at administrative management of peasant life, some indigenous people preferred to keep their distance. This is what happened with a few hundred families, all montagnards, that moved their houses close to the banks of the Sé San River. This was considered to be safer because they were more isolated due to the hard-to-penetrate forests of the northern mountains close to Laos. The people who moved were mainly Kaveth, Brao and Jarai who, for their part, were close to the Vietnamese border. Such movements were not without consequences for the events which followed. The remoteness of the new villages allowed the first Khmer Communists (in the early sixties) and then the future Khmer Rouge (mid-sixties) to quietly settle there and stabilize their base without any real external threat. Sihanouk himself recognized that these refuge areas, including those near Viêt Nam which became out of control by the mid-sixties[97], constituted a considerable threat to the political stability of the nation.

In the district of Andoung Pich located on the eastern outskirts of the province, contact with Cambodian migrants remained elusive and took place without difficulty. Apart from a small number of criminals or thieves, wanted by the police, Lao Buddhist missionaries, or reckless adventurers seeking to make their fortune with the trafficking of prized materials (precious wood, rhino horns, elephant tusks, gums, lacquer, gold, etc.) few of the Cambodians of the plains ventured into the forests of Andoung Pich. Marriage between Khmer women and indigenous individuals from Ratanakiri remained uncommon, but the opposite case was more frequent. Interethnic relations were essentially commercial, motivated by the purchase, most often in the form of barter, of forest products, wild animals and manufactured objects from Viêt Nam and Laos which passed through the Jarai, the Kachoh' and the Brao. Other valuable items, such as forged tools and weapons of

[96] Most deposits of precious stones, such as gold, amethyst, and purple fluorite were quickly depleted. During the sixties, the Kolar moved to the distant Pailin region (bordering Thailand), which was better supplied with quality stones and, according to information received by their relatives, relatively more secure politically and socially. But not all of them left: during one of our visits to Bokeo in December 2015, six nuclear families of the Kolar ethnic group were still present.
[97] Philip Short, *op. cit*., p. 75.

tempered steel as well as ingredients highly sought after by ethnic minorities such as salt, sugar and tobacco, came from Laos, or more rarely Vietnam. A good amount of these imported products passed through a very active community of Chinese established in Veunsai, a small riverside town located on the banks of the river, before the Cultural Revolution at the end of the fifties. These same merchandises also passed through the Brao and the Kaveth who resided upstream of the Sé San River, and had relatives in South Laos.

Hitherto, irregular, non-commercial, interference became more significant in the years that followed with attempts to implement national policies. An event remained engraved in the memory of Phi Phuon. During the month of May 1967, a peaceful demonstration (*pattakam*) took place in Andoung Pich against the rise in the price of rice and basic foodstuffs (salt, tobacco, cotton, fruits), now supplied by the government. A similar revolt was brewing in Samlaut Battambang Province where a revolt before violently erupting at the same time among poor peasants[98]. Between 400 and 500 Jarai, Kachoh ’and Lao people from the district gathered to protest for similar reasons against price manipulation on foodstuffs. Sihanouk's agricultural policy aimed to buy crops at low prices, especially rice, which was the essential commodity. Hence the general discontent across the country, including in the highlands of Ratanakiri. As it turned out, in Andoung Pich district, government officials failed to avoid the interference of a whole host of middlemen and speculators willing to buy locally grown produce at lower prices. In short, both local traders and indigenous populations pursued the same interests. ‘To hell with the state requisition where everyone, at least at the district level, ends up losing out’. Phi Phuon was in charge of organizing the demonstration, protecting the demonstrators and the merchants, and ensuring that there was no abuse on both sides, that is to say between the Cambodian administrators and the local population momentarily allied with the traders, who for the most part were Jarai. The Royal Army was present and its procrastination indicated that it was undecided and worried. The young Jarai had to play the role of conciliator for which he was not prepared. In the meantime, the mobilization was gathering momentum and the tone was worsening. The more time passed, the more difficult it was for the army to play the role of mediator. As for the Jarai, we do not know if the corporal who

[98] I want to thank Ben Kiernan for sending me his out of print materials. Ben Kiernan (1975), *The Samlaut Rebellion and its aftermath, 1967-70. The origins of Cambodia’s Liberation Movement*, Melbourne, Center of Southeast Asian Studies, Working Papers n ° 4, 32 p.

led the troops did not succeed, if he refused to take charge of the case or if he was simply an accomplice of the public officials responsible for requisitioning the rice at a low price. With the tension heightened and following the first physical clashes, soldiers took off their uniforms, deserted and absconded. Others hid behind their weapons when the corporal ordered them to aim. Unexpectedly, the local protection units, which were nothing but nascent revolutionaries, took the lead and managed to settle the dispute and calm the situation. Thus, they showed their effectiveness in managing an intricate conflict endangering both the security of the population and that of an unexperienced administrative and military consortium plagued by unpredictable reactions.

More contested—and less discreet than the introduction of administrators—was the presence of a military intervention brigade, accompanied by a parachute battalion, which established its base in the heart of Ratanakiri in Bokeo. This army contingent was mandated, at least initially, to support the development process and subsequently from 1966 to intensify the ruthless anti-Khmer Rouge campaign launched by Prince Sihanouk. The head of state did not mince his words: he gave the order to physically eliminate the rebels as well as those who supported them. A real manhunt began from the western province of Steung Treng and subsequently extended in 1967 to Ratanakiri, with decapitated heads and mutilated bodies exhibited as trophies.[99]

It is not difficult to imagine the impact of these waves of repression, culminating in a popular parade organized by Sihanouk in Bokeo in February 1968 calling for all the nation's traitors to be arrested. Sihanouk would later announce, at another demonstration in Steung Treng, that he had personally ordered the execution of "a few dozen mountain people", bringing a total of "to about two hundred [montagnards] the number of those who were exterminated".[100] In Steung Treng, the severed heads of the captured rebels were exhibited near district buildings and photographed for distribution in Khmer newspapers.[101]

These reprisals did not lead to peace and, indeed, unsurprisingly in Ratanakiri they had the opposite effect to the one intended. They helped fuel the resentment of

[99] The government demanded their reproduction in mass circulation Khmer gazettes and newspapers.
[100] Words of Sihanouk quoted by Philip Sort, *op. cit*., pp. 175-176.
[101] Philippe Short, *op. cit.* p.120sq.

indigenous populations against the people from the outside. The acts of terror legitimized by the central government worked in favour of the Khmer Rouge who sided with the victims. Long before Sihanouk's Khmer Rouge hunt, Phi Phuon remembers seeing regular army soldiers "with his own eyes" entering his village. This was at the very beginning of the 1960s when he was just fourteen years old. This is the first time he had seen such men in uniform with guns. The smell of others ... These identically dressed soldiers seemed threatening, aggressive and dangerous. They talked loudly and cursed the inhabitants. They were looking for the rebels and demanded to be provided with chickens, pigs, ducks and other pets as well as rice. They gave nothing in exchange and brandished their guns at the villagers who were reluctant to provide the requested loot. He later learnt that shooting broke out in a nearby village, following a failed attempt by some Jarai and Laos to resist armed repression. Such events aroused anger and incomprehension among the indigenous populations.[102]

Without expressly realizing it at the time, a turning point began to take place in the life of teenager Phi Phuon. This story of the intrusion of belligerent Khmer soldiers, speaking a language he did not yet understand, recurred frequently in his speech. "No compensation, absolutely nothing was paid or given in return," he broods. "I got angry and I started to think that if we didn't react, life would quickly become impossible. These soldiers who represent the government act like torturing bandits who come to oppress us. They come to destroy us and subjugate us ... if we remain passive we become their accomplice ".[103]

Later, upon entering the revolution, Phi Phuon got wind of the revolt of the Tampuan, Kreung and Brao who had to evacuate *manu militari* the lands they occupied for the extension of the rubber plantation of Labansiek; located at the central part of the province.[104] Salaried employees on the plantation could not

[102] Looting is indeed unthinkable. It has been noted above that theft is considered among the Jarai to be the worst thing a human being can ever do.

[103] The existence of a wide variety of behaviours in the conduct of the Sihanoukian army should, however, be recognized. This ranged from the most scandalous brutality, as was reported by Phi Phuon in his village, with rather circumspect relations in other parts of the province (testimonies collected in communes to the west of the town of Bokeo, November 1994- May 1995).

[104] Jacqueline Matras-Troubetzkoy (1975), *Un village dans la forêt. L'essartage chez les Brou du Cambodge, province de Ratanakiri),* Paris, SELAF, 400 p. (coll. Cedrasemi)

stand the demanding working conditions and their miserable salary.[105] They organized their own movement of rebellion using bows and crossbows[106] but they were ruthlessly subdued by a military force equipped with small tracked tanks, grenades and AK47 machine guns. Hamlets and houses located in swidden fields were ransacked and around 100 villagers, mostly Brao, were massacred. Most of the survivors, resentful of law enforcement officials and facing land dispossession soon joined the Khmer Rouge.[107]

Another event was important to Phi Phuon. Later in 1967, the Cambodian Regular Army Command (or Royal Army) ordered a search operation to prevent the deployment of the Viet Minh[108], as well as to identify and eliminate their associates. They started by clearing—50 meters wide—the cramped and poorly maintained Road No. 19, which starts from Bokeo and leads towards Vietnam. Three Tampuan of *Phum* Malik were killed following a skirmish provoked by local military scouts recruited by the Royal Army.[109] These three people were messengers of the Central Committee established by the Khmer Rouge. One of the three men, named San, was an acquaintance of Phi Phuon. Searches continued, arrests were made, and young people suspected of being Communists were arrested and tortured. Nobody knew what finally happened to them.

Following this wave of repression, more and more members of ethnic minorities rallied to the idea—then advocated by the Viet Minh, and more radically by the first Khmer Rouge just installed—that a peaceful solution was not possible. The idea of negotiation was an illusion. The people of Malik and Katai were the most

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[105] The notion of work at a fixed, regulated hour, according to very precise rules and with a system of penalties if the work is not properly done is completely foreign to the familiar, much more convivial conception of the notion of " work" (or rather "exchange of services") among ethnic minorities.

[106] This movement of revolt against the rubber plantation is mentioned by Charles Meyer (1979), Les nouvelles provinces: Ratanakiri-Mundolkiri', *Revue Monde en développement*, Paris, 28, Éditions du CNRS, pp. 682-690 (Coll. Economica). However, the author does not mention his sources of information, and other observant witnesses, notably Henri Locard, present in the province from 1966, consider that the conflicts, as presented by Meyer, are largely exaggerated. (Henri Locard, personal communication, November 2016).

[107] Testimony of Kreung men, north of Lumpath, November 1994.

[108] Unlike the Chinese troops who entered north Viêt Nam to assist them in the struggle against the French and the Japanese in the forties, the Vietnamese troops entered Cambodia for establishing sanctuaries, as well as for pushing for the revolution and training cadres.

[109] The soldiers were reportedly warned of the arrival of these messengers who were ambushed.

determined to mobilize because they were at the epicentre of the conflict. The presence of victims, dead or missing, in these two villages stirred a collective desire to join the revolutionary movement in the process of being developed. This rallying was, moreover, facilitated by Ieng Sary (one of the future Khmer Rouge leaders) who had already visited Malik on several occasions, probably from 1965.[110] The inhabitants of the surrounding villages were similarly intoxicated with his bland, skilfully constructed speeches, that promised hope for the future. These were not yet politico-ideological statements, but speeches that dealt with solidarity, brotherhood and union between peoples historically discriminated against, abandoned and threatened by the powerful of the cities.

**The revolt of the highlanders reinforced by the Viet Minh**

It was Phi Phuon's father, and especially his maternal uncle, who encouraged the young adolescent to engage in armed struggle by urging him to join the Vietnamese Communists. The teenager was already sensitive to the idea of rebellion following the traumatic images he remembered: images of Khmer soldiers of the Royal Sihanoukist Army looking for "communist traitors to the nation" and who with impunity ransacked the villages, sometimes "borrowing" beautiful young girls and burning the huts of recalcitrant people. The father of Phi Phuon had, in the late 1940's, already joined the resistance movement against French colonialism under the auspices of the Viet Minh (Vietnamese communist revolutionaries) who had been present, but in small numbers, in the 1950's in the north-east of the Cambodia.[111] His father, however, remained in Ratanakiri, unlike his uncle who went to Viêt Nam and then to China to study engineering. It is not known whether the latter received communism indoctrination with Mao followers. Both claimed to belong to the *Issarak* movement. He remembers the image of his father who returned to the village in 1954, annoyed and armed with a hunting rifle, after the Geneva Agreements on Peace in Indochina, that is to say, after the cessation of arrests of *Issarak* fighters for independence. These Geneva Accords stipulated the evacuation of all Viet Minh troops in the non-Vietnamese part of ex-Indochina, a difficult commitment and not to say impossible to put in place given the permanence of political conflicts from one country to another and especially the desire of the Viet Minh to extend their political ideology in this part of the southern

[110] Testimony of various residents of *Phum* Malik in January 1995.

[111] Their erratic presence in the 1950's intensified during the 1960's.

peninsula (i.e. Cambodia and Laos).[112] Phi Phuon's father took the Viet Minh point of view and didn't want it to end there. Making peace with the enemy meant abdicating and submitting. He intended to continue the fight and train others, starting with his relatives. Despite the Geneva Agreements, not respected by the Viet Minh, and despite a fleeting moment of calm with regard to these same Agreements, some indigenous people[113], all single volunteered to receive technical and/or political training in North Vietnam, mostly in Hanoi.[114]

One of his unmarried paternal uncles, also decided to leave but he never returned: the family later learnt that he died following a battle between regular forces and rebels in Laos between 1965 and 1967. His father decided to stay with his family, anxious to take care of his children, but also to instil in them the revolutionary spirit. He advanced the slogans heard many times by his inspirers: 'if the struggle is strewn with difficulties and obstacles, perseverance as well as the spirit of sacrifice are the key to success in achieving victory and the liberation of the country'. When I asked Phi Phuon what his father meant by "country", he specified that it was "their country", a poorly defined place which included a territory with blurred administrative borders, the reference criterion being the presence of small communities who are part of the, until then despised, indigenous peoples—the use of the adjective was made by Phi Phuon—by the Cambodian government of the sixties.

Phi Phuon, more attentive and enterprising than his two other brothers present at the same time in the family hut, listened attentively and chose the strategy to adopt. The first step was to clearly define the objectives to be achieved followed

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[112] According to the American historian William J. Duiker, Moscow's insistence played a major role for trying to unify the communists in the three countries against French colonization and, later on, in a more hidden way, against American intervention. See William J. Ducker, *op. cit*., p. 187 and pp. 527-543.

[113] Estimates by Phi Phuon (February 2015) corroborated by those of his older brother Rocham Tveng (April 2015).

[114] Only two people from this promotion are still alive: Seuy Keo and Bou Thang. The latter is a Tampuan who was Minister of Defense within of the new government formed after the overthrow of the Khmer Rouge in January 1979. In 2018 he was still a senator in Phnom Penh. The rest were mostly killed by the Khmer Rouge who, once in power, accused them of not being genuine Khmer revolutionaries free from any Vietnamese ideological influence. For more narratives, see: Ian G. Baird (2020), *Rise of the Brao. Ethnic Minorities in Northeastern Cambodia during Vietnamese Occupation,* op. cit.

by a recognition that the "struggle" (terminology used by his father and uncles) required strict discipline. Then, he said, you had to be able to put the interests of the country, and more particularly “his Jarai Country”, before his own interests. In the end, it was crucial to show proof of dedication and sacrifice. So many keywords and major concepts intended to guide and inspire the daily struggle. His father also mentioned the miserable condition of the indigenous peoples. He told his children that they absolutely needed to get out of endemic poverty. He vehemently asserted that peasants who were ethnic minorities had always endured a thousand sufferings due to their inability to access the knowledge to which every human being has a right through a solid education provided by a responsible government. His words marked the teenager all the more when his father, assisted by his uncle, who was passing through Ratanakiri during his stay in Vietnam, asserted that the peasants of the forest were deprived of basic freedoms and had no democratic rights. These were completely new concepts, although the Ratanakirian societies were deeply egalitarian, but the power of seduction of these words attracted many young indigenous like Phi Phuon. What is more, it was vehemently asserted in the propaganda that the standard of living of the indigenous people was the lowest and most precarious of anyone, whilst the majority of the people of the plains had nothing but contempt for the original inhabitants of the province regarded them as dust, that is to say, as the poor debris of humanity.

Notwithstanding these speeches that Phi Phuon gradually appropriated[115], the father, head of the family, resumed his life as a peasant but did not, however, abandon his parallel activities. In addition, he occasionally served as a messenger between the Viet Minh rebel camps (located on both sides around the border) and Cambodia. Phi Phuon's father knew how to sneak into the forest and navigate according to the sun during the day and the moon and stars at night. Back home after having been trained in guerrilla techniques in the Vietnamese *maquis*, his uncle escorted the Vietnamese cadres and helped them to recruit the first Lao, Brao, Lun, Kaveth, Kachoh', Kreung, Jarai and Tampuan into the Viet Minh. He accompanied them from village to village in order to organize political propaganda sessions. At the beginning Laotian played the role of *lingua franca*[116] but with the intensification of contacts with the Vietnamese, the Jarai language, transcribed into Latin script by American missionaries was increasingly used within the home

[115] We can recognize here the some of the main ideological lines launched under Hô Chi Minh.

[116] Due to the dominant number of Laotians in the revolutionary movement since the engagement against the French settlers in Ratanakiri.

community. This was also perhaps because the Jarai constituted a sizeable fraction of the Viet Minh troops. Phi Phuon wished to prove it to me and showed me the initiation book written in Jarai and which he kept with him as one of his most precious treasures.[117]

The Viet Minh encouraged the development of writing Jarai, both on the Cambodian side and the Vietnamese side, by offering lessons every Saturday and Sunday for a year. Phi Phuon, like his colleagues, learnt it by using charcoal as ink and sharp bamboo tubes as fountain pens. The memory of this writing contemplated as an identity and revolutionary vehicle constituted an important moment during our interviews. One day, while we were discussing the methods of transcription, I realized after a while that he was no longer listening to me. He was absorbed and seemed elsewhere. He had returned to the forests of the unoccupied zones and, equipped with a modern pen and notebook, spent almost an hour without saying a word, trying to find sentences once written or read. He concocted a few signs, put them together and wrote a number of sentences. I quietly asked him what he was writing but he did not answer me and was satisfied with a smile. He'd gone off somewhere and, no longer daring to disturb him, I refrained from abruptly bringing him back to our discussions.

In the early sixties, his father kept urging his children to engage in the revolution, launched by the Viet Minh against American imperialism and the great Western powers. The Viet Minh evoked the victory against the French and the independence they won with strong determination and complete commitment. Their success deserved to serve as a model and this model had to be supported by international communism established and controlled by the Viet Minh.[118] Phi Phuon, more than his brothers, knew how to be particularly receptive to this call. He was undoubtedly the most suitable for taking the step to engage in armed struggle. During the interviews, he repeatedly asserted that he was irreparably marked by the feeling of injustice and hatred towards the soldiers of the regular army whose unacceptable behaviour he had been able to gauge once and for all.

It was during 1963 that Phi Phuon, barely sixteen, decided to follow his father's advice, guided by the example of his maternal uncle who had learned the art of

[117] The book will also be placed by his relatives on his temporary tomb in Malai and then on his final burial in *Phum* Lom in Ratanakiri in 2016.

[118] Such a point, till the beginning, was never accepted by the Khmer Rouge.

guerrilla warfare from the other side of the border. His mother was reluctant to see him go, but his father and maternal uncle who lived in Viêt Nam knew how to convince her. She had no other choice but to obey, while making her son promise not to cut ties with his family and to come back as often as possible, without ever missing important ceremonial events (weddings, funerals within kinship, important ceremonies, etc.). A promise he would keep only occasionally and only until 1970.

It is important to stress that in the early stages of his activism, Phi Phuon did not join the Khmer Rouge, whose future leaders were not yet firmly present in Ratanakiri or elsewhere in the countryside. Khmers of the Communist Party (*pracheachun*) returned to dissent, such as Bang Sim[119], from Prey Veng, and Bang Vy, a former journalist from Phnom Penh, both in their thirties, who were probably present from the end of 1964 in the province and were getting closer to the Viet Minh and advised them on the activities to be undertaken and how to develop a first form of resistance organized at the local level. These two men were also sent by Pol Pot to create the first Cambodian communist branch in the province. At the time, the two characters who settled in another part of the province did not yet know Phi Phuon and vice versa. The former teacher and intellectual Ney Sarann (*Ta Ya*), another dissident, arrived in Ratanakiri.[120] These great men, as they were reverently called—and known locally as *neak thom*—were supposed to provide logistical and ideological support to the peoples of the forest who, according to the revolutionaries of the plains, did not yet have sufficient education to organize and effectively plan the revolutionary struggle. It was, therefore, to these forerunners of the armed struggle that the responsibility to set up ideological propaganda as well as to assume the deployment of revolutionaries at the level of the three districts, communes and villages fell. This all took place under the benevolent eyes of the Vietnamese Communists with whom they were in close contact, either directly as long as these dissident Khmers were not too far from the Viet Minh sanctuaries or through the intermediary of ethnic messengers.

In addition to these lowland Khmers, who were still few in number, the former *Issarak* of the 1950s from Ratanakiri and seasoned in armed resistance were among

[119] Her daughter currently lives (in 2018) in Malai, north-western of the country (Bantey Meanchey Province), near the Thai border.

[120] He would later become responsible for the northern region (Eisan) but was purged under the Khmer Rouge in 1977. See Martin Rathie (2008), *Revolutionary cousins: Lao-Cambodian Revolutionary Links*, Phnom Penh, Documentation Center (DC-Cam), 56 p.

the first indigenous revolutionary cadres.[121] We find, among others, Veng Khuon (a Brao of Taveng), Khamphay (a Lao of Veunsai), Thonbai (a Tampuan/Lao of Veunsai, Try Pheng (a Kreung of O'chum) and Chan Nukeo (a Lao of Lumphat).[122] The establishment of a network of militants for the development of a communication and information service largely precedes the arrival of the future Khmer Rouge whose real policy remained at this time of uncertainty totally passed over in silence.

A group of revolutionary messengers thus begins to develop in a few villages in the province, but external encouragement, Vietnamese or Khmer, remained flexible and voluntary, never threatening. The information conveyed remained essentially focused on practical questions: connection, search for information on the situation in a given place, exchanges between village chiefs, announcement of the arrival of an expected person, etc. With the Viet Minh at war in their country, a process more controlled by higher authorities was developing: messages became coded, the choice of message carriers became stricter, and the content of these messages was more political. Communication was now centralized, vertical and no longer horizontal as before. The future Khmer Rouge cadres soon took over this information transmission system on their own, this time by prohibiting the Viet Minh from deciphering the messages[123], even though the two protagonists were still supposed to collaborate for the same cause.

Indeed, the function of messenger very quickly took centre stage with the arrival of the Khmer Rouge leaders. Towards the end of the 1960s, a Tampuan messenger, named Loi, from *Phum* Malik (a village halfway between Talao and Bokeo), travelled great distances in neighbouring provinces and went to Phnom Penh. I met this man with his wife, quite by chance, in 2017 in his swidden field thanks to his son-in-law – a former Khmer Rouge - living in Malik. His stern-looking wife told me that at that time revolution was everywhere. Her husband, capable of identifying poorly marked paths in the forests that no one else could see, knew how to navigate day using indications of which he was intimately acquainted and at night with the stars. He conveyed messages to Phnom Penh more than a dozen times. He left alone on foot from the headquarters of the Central Committee (see below)

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[121] The term *kamaphibal* (revolutionary framework) adopted by the Khmer Rouge was not yet used at this time.

[122] Matin Rathie, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

[123] Messages written in Jarai were abandoned (and banned) under Ieng Sary and Pol Pot from 1966.

where he was given a coded message, usually written by Pol Pot himself.[124] The man obviously wanted to describe one of his peregrinations. At the end of 1968, he had just been given a bamboo tube containing a coded message. He immediately began his long walk in the forest north of the town of Kratie located more than two hundred kilometres along the Mekong. He went barefoot, dressed in a loincloth, with a cup, meagre provisions and a little Khmer money. In Kratie he changed his clothes and took a small local bus when he had the chance to find one (otherwise he might, with other travellers, charter a small wooden boat) and disembarked in Phnom Penh with the instruction to go to a small pension near to the Lanka pagoda (*Vat Lanka*) located not far from the Independence monument. There he was expected by the innkeeper who introduced him to Nuon Chea (or one of his representatives) to whom he had to deliver the message in person but the two men never spoke to one another. In any case, the Loi courier spoke very little Khmer and knew even less how to read it. He was allowed to rest for a day or two, but was ordered not to go out even in the nearby pagoda. He had to wait for the reply and then was ordered to leave. Later, ironically, he was not admitted to be a Khmer Rouge soldier for health reasons (physical fragility!). And, anyway, he told me, he'd rather return to his low-key peasant life, given the disturbing, and totally unforeseen, turn of events with the popular Khmer Rouge government established in 1970.

Another messenger, also from *Phum* Malik, carried messages to Vietnam. Some went to the 'Dragon's Tail' (the extreme northern tip of the country) and travelled for at least three days after stopping halfway at *Phum* Chay. Still others were special messengers of the Central Committee (made up exclusively of a small minority of Khmer Rouge cadres like Pol Pot, Ieng Sary, Khieu Ponnary, Bang Sim, Son Sen and his wife). All the messengers were men except for one woman, Teny[125], who carried messages from the south of the Sé San River to the north where Brao, Kaveth and a few Lao reside. The squaring of the territory that the Khmer Rouge intended to control for the extension of the guerrilla base implied the intensification of the

[124] According to interviewee, *Phum* Malik, March 2017.

[125] Over 70 years old, she was still alive at the end of 2015. She lived in Andong Meas. Her husband died under the Khmer Rouge regime. They did not have children.

recruitment of messengers who, according to Pol Pot's nephew[126], existed at the rate of two or three in each village.

For long distances, that is to say those that take more than a day, relay stages were organized with the connivance of handpicked villagers. These families were asked to discreetly receive the messengers and to feed them, but above all not to ask them questions about their destination. The role of messengers, which grew in number was, therefore, crucial. They were told over and over again, as a motivation if needed, that the success of the revolution was proportional to the success of their mission. Phi Phuon and Pol Pot's nephew agree that no one was caught, apart from the three young men of *Phum* Malik, still novices, who were shot dead by the Royal Army. This was at the very beginning of the creation of the messenger system, and the precautions to avoid the enemy were not yet firmly established.

**The Viet Minh presence**

The Viet Minh, cadres and soldiers[127], for their part, arrived in small contingents at the very beginning of 1960. Apart from the fact, reported by Margareth Slocomb, that as early as 1965 Sihanouk discreetly authorized the temporary withdrawal and passage of these military troops into the northeast region of the country[128], very little information is available to indicate the fluctuating number of Vietnamese on Cambodian soil and *a fortiori* in Ratanakiri. Phi Phuon and his brother Rocham Tveng confirmed that the Viet Minh gradually infiltrated the whole province from the beginning of the sixties and increasingly from the late sixties. The military were supported by Vietnamese civilians playing the role of political commissar, and these tended to settle in more permanent ways. The Viet Minh presence increased as

[126] Interviewed at his home in Malai, February 2015. This ration has also been confirmed by other Jarai and Lao informants, but only for the eastern part of the country.

[127] There are also a few Jarai families who were fleeing the war in Viêt Nam, and came to take refuge on the Cambodian side. Phi Phuon recalls with amusement that they were asking for potatoes.

[128] By terminating diplomatic relations with the United States in May 1965, Sihanouk authorized the Chinese, Russians and Czechs to use the port of Sihanoukville to supply arms to Vietnamese Communist troops wishing to prepare for the Tet offensive planned for 1968. Further north, in Ratanakiri as in Mundolkiri Provinces, the Vietnamese communists were secretly authorized by Sihanouk to establish sanctuaries. See Margareth Slocomb (2003), *The People's Republic of Kampuchea 1979-1989: The Revolution after Pol Pot*, Chiangmai, Silkworm Books, 369 p.

one approached the border because it was necessary to liaise with the Communists operating in the two neighbouring provinces bombarded by the Americans of Pleiku and Kontum. To this must be added the episodic expansion of sanctuaries in the forest, as well as an impressive volume of labour, composed of thousands of civilians of both sexes, necessary for the continuous clearing, maintenance and monitoring of the Hô Chi Minh Trail in the mountainous and unpopulated far north of Ratanakiri.

Phi Phuon kept emphasizing that, unlike regular army soldiers, Viet Minh troops made a point of being favoured by the local population. The rapprochement with the population of Andoung Pich was facilitated by the fact that a significant number of members of these Vietnamese soldiers were Jarai from the western provinces of the neighbouring country. They spoke the same language, knew the same way of life, and Vietnamese soldiers had relatives in common with their cousins in Cambodia. Phi Phuon's brother attested that the Viet Minh executives gave instructions to treat the inhabitants as well as possible. In the event of a serious illness requiring hospitalization, and in the absence of health facilities in the vicinity of the Sé San River, a chain of paramedics (sometimes improvised) was organized to transport the sick to Vietnam.[129] It was stated many times by all the informants I met that the Vietnamese soldiers and their superiors never took anything by force from the villagers: everything was bought, bartered and negotiated. If a Viet Minh took something in times of imminent need, people knew that the Viet Minh will pay off his debt as soon as possible. It was about setting an example in the face of any hardship and showing integrity. As long as villagers offered food reserves to soldiers, the rule of one loan for return was systematically applied. It happens that some women Vietnamese troops participated in the work in the fields, not only to partly ensure their subsistence but also to occasionally help the few poor families who found it difficult to make ends meet.[130]

The Viet Minh were keen to publicize useful wartime advice to deal with Royal Cambodian Army troops seen as the common enemy. Subsequently the provided advice on how best to deal with the anticipated and feared appearance of American

[129] Pol Pot, himself suffering from severe malaria, will benefit from this service. He will be carried on a makeshift stretcher by a group of Jarai who will take him to a health center across the border.

[130] Testimony collected in December 2015 in a Kachoh' village of Andong Meas (ex Andoung Pich).

bombings.[131] These instructions, which fall under the *tosu noyobai* (political struggle and attack against the *Sangkum* Army), were not reserved just for the military. They showed people the best strategies to protect themselves. They only instructed those who wanted to hear it because, in any case, they wanted to be assimilated to military settlers. They showed the best ways to take refuge in the forest, the ways of preparing temporary habitats such as the digging of trenches, as well as the techniques of concealment in the high forests. They taught the art of hiding in families or in small communities without being detected. They recommended dissemination techniques to residents that they already used themselves: avoid staying together in too large numbers in the event of enemy aggression[132], and prioritize sheltering women, the elderly and children. They did not encourage dispersal to all comers but knew that an association of humans was always more likely to be spotted if the group was in the attackers' sights (bombardments, searches, raids by Cambodian troops).

Knowing that they were the exclusive targets of the Americans at the time when Prince Sihanouk allowed the temporary presence of their sanctuaries on Cambodian territory, the Vietnamese Communist troops were careful not to stay in proximity with the inhabitants. From the moment the prince changed his policy and sent military intervention brigades to hunt down the Communists, the Viet Minh visits were stealthy and took place without any ostentation. Their words aimed above all to instil revolutionary ideology as well as to identify intermediaries, if possible in each hamlet. The objective was to constitute a structured network, with the identification of local officials and the appointment of messengers carrying instructions and practical information. A networking system therefore began to develop with the advance of the Viet Minh from the very beginning of the sixties. This arrangement adapted to the Cambodian military presence without any Khmer Rouge interference, and apparently, if I am allowed to believe what the great majority of my informants told me repeatedly, the attitude of the Viet Minh was

[131] Information from Laos as well as leaders in Hanoi reportedly warned populations, through combatants on the ground, of the imminent bombardment. Testimony conceded by two close relatives of Rocham Tveng.

[132] Information from a former Khmer Rouge, So Hong, Pol Pot's nephew (who was for a while in Ratanakiri with the expectation to join his uncle he admired), belies this claim. According to him, the Khmer Rouge would be the first to incite the local populations to scatter. On the contrary, the Viet Minh encouraged the inhabitants to remain grouped in villages. Note that So Hong inherited from his uncle Pol Pot a visceral hatred towards the Vietnamese.

not seen as shocking or even intrusive by the indigenous people. On the contrary, they appeared to many villagers to be daring protectors and inspirers.

Viet Minh propaganda was cascading, it began with the arrival of competent executives who quickly, albeit sparingly, entrusted their propaganda mission to a few Cambodians such as Vy and Sim, as well as to small disciplined groups of ethnic minorities who had to demonstrate justified political conviction (fight against imperialism, social liberation of oppressed peoples, equitable sharing of resources, mobilization for the development of education and health services, etc.) and unfailing probity. The Viet Minh aspired to represent and show an exemplary model of revolutionary action and the Vietnamese leaders made it known that they would not allow any deviation in behaviour among the Viet Minh recruits based and traveling in Cambodia.[133] The enlistment and then the formation of local revolutionary elements was the logical extension of the Viet Minh intervention in Cambodia, the same Army that had favoured the rise of the Khmer *Issarak* a dozen years earlier.

Everything suggests—contrary to the expansionist theory perceiving them as alleged political colonialists—that they were not aiming to expand their presence in the country, except to ensure the transit of goods and men along the Hô Chi Minh tracks to the South Viet Cong. The vast majority of facts and testimonies collected *posteriori* indicate that they certainly aspired to spread the particular ideology advocated by Hô Chi Minh, without striving to control and maintain the reins of power.[134] As it stands, Phi Phuon and his indigenous colleagues saw them as support units and, to some extent, political trainers. The Cambodian leaders were expected to act like the Vietnamese except that these Khmers from the plains —the *Khmer Kandal*—did not intend at all to follow their advice, as we will see later.

At the end of 1963, Phi Phuon was part of a group of twenty montagnards firmly determined to leave for North Viêt Nam in order to receive substantial political

[133] A sixty-year-old man from a Lao village in Andong Meas told me in 2011 that a handful of Viet Minh soldiers were accused of stealing poultry from a hamlet. Denounced by their colleagues and aggrieved villagers, they were repatriated to Viêt Nam after having to issue a public apology. History does not tell the treatment they received in their country.

[134] Testimonies from former Brao and Tampuan political commissars (villages on the edge of the Sé San River, December 1995).

training allowing them to become cadres upon their return.[135] This spontaneous and voluntary association included three young girls. As far as they were concerned, their desire to leave was the result of strictly personal initiatives. They did not go through conventional networks from which individuals were, in principle, later carefully selected by the Viet Minh and a few Khmer leaders, who assisted them to assess their intellectual potential and political motivation to engage in the collective revolutionary cause. In other words, they wanted to show their determination and capacity to be part of the hardcore group of revolutionaries. When they reached the border, they were greeted politely with due respect, but were not allowed to enter Vietnam. The planned numbers were exceeded and unfortunately there was no room for them out of their country. The Viet Minh let them know that they would find a place in their province where the local revolutionary movement needed people like them. Three quarters of them followed this advice and returned to their home village. However, five young men including Phi Phuon decided to go and live in the forest around Phnom Nga hill, near the village of Chay (Talao commune), itself near the border where there was a Viet Minh contingent. They cleared a plot of land and plant several varieties of legumes. The contiguous presence of flat land allowed them to prepare a small rain fed rice field at the same time. They also started to breed a small number of pigs and poultry. They were equipped with light rifles of Czechoslovak and Soviet origin that had passed through Vietnam. These were old-fashioned and non-automatic weapons that can only fire one bullet at a time and must be reloaded with care. This sketchy artillery had the advantage, however, of reaching low-flying planes in these hilly regions without too much difficulty. The five young men built a shelter hidden under foliage with a kitchen dug underground so as not to let smoke escape. They managed to be accepted for attending monthly political meetings organized by the Vietnamese who had finally agreed to improve their ideological education. Also taught was the theory of political struggle involving the struggle against the *Sangkum* Army (*tosu noyobai*). They lived there for a year and a half, after which time they went their separate ways.

One day, after spending more than a year as peasants and in close contact with them, some Viet Minh cadres asked where they planned to go. The five young people responded in unison that they were willing to go anywhere. They declared themselves ready to obey the orders of their Vietnamese tutors. The latter revealed

[135] All, according to our informant, are currently deceased.

to them that important Khmer political officers (Ieng Sary, Saloth Sâr, Son Sen) would soon arrive and that this would allow them to seal the alliance between the Vietnamese, Cambodian and Laotian peoples against the common enemy "number one", the Americans and their oppressive Khmer allies, considered the internal enemies of the people.

**Thunder in the sky**

The bombardments by American planes were equated with endless thunder. Thunder is, in the indigenous conception, considered to be the divine manifestation of a dissatisfaction with the higher powers. These bring together in hierarchical order an eminent elusive deity, a multitude of forest spirits and local spirits as well as wandering souls inclined to return to the living, therefore disturbing and harassing human beings. These animate powers are endowed with a power of harmful interference for humans. They must be appeased through propitiatory sacrifices likely to modify the social and biological disorder thus created. The thunderclap that characterizes the storm and the fleeting flash that accompanies it does not come unexpectedly. These are physiological manifestations that point to serious misfortune. Thunderstorms and lightning testify to a cosmological dysfunction calling for redress. But what then happened to attract the spawn of the earthly deities and the wrath of the dead? And what kind of “repair” was expected?[136] Which kind of forgiveness ceremonies should be worth doing at the village level? As long as these unprecedented thunderous manifestations were repeated, as with the incessant bombardments, human society remained helpless and bordered on social breakdown. It is, therefore, not surprising that the American bombing at first, far from being thought of as the work of a foreign aggressive land, created amazement, anxiety and then terror among the local population.[137]

[136] Questions reported by Kachoh’ villagers from Veunsai district as well as by Tampuan people from O’chum district (late 1994 and early 1995) who experienced these bombings.

[137] Opinions and interpretations on the origin of the "thunders" differ locally. But examination of this tendency of seeing air attacks as a manifestation of divine fury was understood in this way by a majority of the native people.

"The tracks in the sky which plunge their venom on earth"[138], to use the expression of a Brao, begin in 1963, maybe even in 1962.[139] First in the mountainous region in the extreme north of Sé San River which was the heart of the immense forest wrongly suspected of sheltering Viet Minh sanctuaries, then near the Brao, Lun and Kaveth villages. They eventually approached the Vietnamese border and reached several Jarai and Kachoh' villages. Craters from these bombs are still visible today. Bombs were dropped and exploded almost everywhere in the province: later, the capital Lumphat was completely razed.[140] Only the immediate environment of Bokeo was spared, where, until 1970, an increasingly small contingent of the Cambodian regular Army resided. The primary reason for these bombardments was that the United States of America feared the 'domino effect' and so developed a simplistic and extremely inept and murderous strategy of containment. Basically, at the risk of oversimplifying, in order to better target them it was about containing the enemy by forcing them to regroup and concentrate. At the same time, the deployment of communist troops constituted one of the major American concerns. They suspected, this time with good reason, the existence of Viet Minh sanctuaries on Cambodian territory and intended to stop their spread.[141]

On the other hand, the flow of Chinese munitions mostly for the Viet Cong had to be cut at any cost. The proven presence of the Hô Chi Minh Trail (see Map 2) as well as the arms traffic which started in 1966 through the southern port of

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[138] See, regarding the American intervention in Viêt Nam, the work by Gérard Hickey*, op. cit.*

[139] The year 1962 still continue to be a question of controversy. I decide to mention this year, without definitely validating it, because it was constantly given to me as the year of reference by the great majority of villagers who told me about their first bombings they witnessed at that time. Besides, the historical sources, which I quote here from memory without being able to name them, also recognize that American pilots would have started to clandestinely bomb North Viêt Nam, as well as parts of South Laos and North Cambodia at that time, in the hope of destabilizing the Hô Chi Minh government and preventing the communism expansion into neighboring countries.

[140] According to other information randomly gathered by Henri Locard in 1994 from inhabitants of the former capital Lumpath, the city would have been bombarded by the Americans, but not completely razed: it was the Khmer Rouge who demolished the many solid buildings in 1975, when the popular communes were created (personal communication, November 2016).

[141] Another theory, reported by William J. Duiker (*op. cit*., pp.550-551), affirmed that the U.S. units were, at the end of the President Johnson administration, engage in "search and destroy" operations to "weaken the [Vietnamese] resistance movement and drive the insurgent forces out of the lowland villages back into the Central Highlands and across the Cambodian border, thus depriving the revolution of access to recruits and provisions".

Sihanoukville and ended after the coup d'état[142] had to be wiped out, by aerial bombardment by the Americans. These roads, or rather these hundreds of paths, patiently cleared and maintained day and night by tens of thousands of Vietnamese men and women, stretched out like a tree root unfolding in many directions.[143] They were used for the transport of weapons to the Viet Cong as well as for munitions necessary to supply both the troops of South Viêt Nam and those stationed on the Cambodian and Laotian outskirts.

Very quickly the air raids intensified and went so far as to target villager's farms and crops. US intelligence believed that these cultivated fields with a hut in the centre were helicopter tracks with insurgent shelters.[144] In February 1963, the first bombardments flattened the village of Phi Phuon. There were a few wounded and the villagers fled into the forest without having time to take anything with them. The attacks resumed the following month, causing 31 deaths and one serious injury. In October of the same year, new airstrikes resumed. They destroyed a large part of the village and claimed 12 victims, both dead and injured. Phi Phuon maintains that he saw, but only once, Sihanouk's government helicopters land, count the dead and evacuate the wounded towards Phnom Penh. The bombardments intensified towards the end of 1963 and the beginning of the following year. The war planes continued their activities between 1963 and 1967, but the bombs were mainly launched on the Vietnamese side in the neighbouring provinces of Pleiku and Kontum where many Jarai and other social groups lived in the turmoil of the war like the Rhades, the Sedang, the Brou, the Bahnar and the Reungao.[145]

The Viet Minh, however, warned the indigenous Cambodian populations that returning to their homes put them at risk of future bombardments. This information was quickly confirmed in the light of search operations in the valleys and plains of Andoung Pich, once again considered by the Americans as one of the preferential places of attraction for the establishment of Vietnamese sanctuaries.

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[142] Thomas L. Ahern (2004), *Good Questions, Wrong Answers. CIA Estimates of Arm Traffic Through Sihanoukville, Cambodia, During the Vietnam War*, An Intelligence Monograph, Washington DC, Center for the Study of Intelligence, 52 p. CIA's estimated traffic arms through Sihanoukville.pdf

[143] https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/u-s-jets-bomb-ho-chi-minh-trail

[144] Georges Condominas (*op. cit.*) similarly mentions such mistakes caused by American planes in Vietnamese territory.

[145] Gerard Hickey, *op. cit*.

The return of the fatal shelling forced the inhabitants to seek refuge in the forest.[146] In 1965 in view of this persistent threat, all the inhabitants of the *Phum* Khaet of Phi Phuon decided to leave the village once and for all, removing from the rubble the meagre possessions and the few animals spared. Since that day, no domestic elephant has existed in the surrounding villages. The elders of *Phum* Khaet, at least the survivors, suggested that the inhabitants separate and go to their fields in order to pick up what was still standing. The harvested products were packed before being taken to the northern forest considered to be a more suitable hiding place.

From the end of 1967 and at the beginning of 1968 the Americans intensified bombardments in Ratanakiri. They were particularly violent and frequent near the Vietnamese border, still poorly drawn and already subject to dispute. Larger bombers were mainly responsible. The already decrepit villages of Khaet and Chê, as well as those of Ta Gna[147] and Nhang near the border, were once again shelled and destroyed even though they were no longer permanently inhabited. Phi Phuon said that the Americans were also targeting small streams (*o'*), believing that the morning condensation emanating from them was smoke from kitchens built by the Viet Cong and their accomplices. Taking caution to the extreme, the Jarai dug kitchens into the ground, while ensuring that smoke could not escape. The forest turned into Swiss cheese with trenches dug with bare hands for shelter in the event of 'fire sky'. The American bombing reached its peak in Ratanakiri in 1969 and the start of 1970.

My guide Pan Van Dai, a Kachoh' from the village of Koh Piek who was fifteen years old in 1968, recalls that when the Americans began bombing his village, the inhabitants first fled into the forest. At the time, the village was already based a little further upstream along the river. Under the trees, they built makeshift houses for discreet shelter. Here too, as in the Andoung Pich district further east towards the Vietnamese border, they saw the famous letters 'coming from the sky' urging people to return to their villages, with the statement, made by the American troops, mentioned, again and again, that nothing would be done to them. It was a single plane that dropped these letters, whereas for the bombing raids there were many more. The letters were written in Khmer, on coloured paper (red, blue, white). Apart from the fact that at the time very few people could read Khmer apart from the *Mephum*, the *Mekhum* and the schoolteacher (when there was one), most

[146] Vietnamese troops trained as dispersed guerrillas to avoid open areas that are easily spotted.
[147] I could verify that bomb craters were still visible in December 2015.

villagers didn't believe these recommendations, and more often than not, under the advice of their elders and chiefs, they stayed in the forest. Pan Van Dai remembers that the plane dropping the letters flew quite low, more so than the other planes which regularly bombed furiously. This letter-dropping operation lasted around 3 months, between 1968 and 1969. The Vietnamese soldiers, for their part, tried their best to discourage the villagers that if they opened the letters, poison would come out.

Fomented by Lon Nol—the then prime minister—and Prince Sirik Matak, the overthrow of the Head of State, Norodom Sihanouk, came on March 18 1970. In an unexpected twist Prince Sihanouk made a radical change in allegiance, but such a *volte-face* became a good omen for the Khmer Rouge. His longstanding neutralist position, so often claimed, did not have any legitimacy nor acceptability after being banished by the new Republican government. He publicly announced his unconditional rallying to his former sworn enemies of the day before in Beijing (he appended his dismissal when he took the plane from Moscow to the Chinese capital) before joining them for a short time in the evergreen forests of the province of Steung Treng.[148] At the same time, Pol Pot made a secret visit to China during the overthrow of Prince Sihanouk but he learnt later of the prince's almost immediate decision to join the revolutionaries.[149] American air strikes on the Hô Chi Minh Trail came to a halt before resuming in massive numbers in 1972 until the beginning of 1973. Phi Phuon was no longer in Ratanakiri by then. But despite only random communications, he later managed to learn, during a Khmer Rouge rally in the eastern province of Kompong Cham, that no casualties had been reported in his village. On the other hand, the neighbouring villages of Ta Gna and Nhang (a

[148] The deposed head of state Norodom Sihanouk had never really gone underground. His visit to Strung Treng was rather, a publicized “visit” intended to show his opposition to the Republicans who had stolen power from him. Sensitive to pomp and large receptions, at the time he held the upper hand in Beijing, he became a man respected and honored by Mao and Zhou Enlai. He was regularly present at all major official occasions. The French Ambassador to China (1969-1975) Étienne Mana’ch was his great friend and received him continuously with the highest honors.

[149] The testimonies collected by historians suggest that his “rallying” to the Khmer Rouge revolutionary movement was strongly influenced by the intervention of Zhou Enlai and Pham Van Dong, the then Prime Minister of North Viêt Nam who arrived urgently from Hanoi during the announcement of a coup in Cambodia. Pol Pot was also there, but he never met the prince. The latter, Norodom Sihanouk, was completely unaware, at that time, of the presence and real identity of the future leader of Democratic Kampuchea in Beijing.

*Phum* which has now become a commune or a *khum*) counted new deaths and many wounded.

# Chapter 3

## FROM AN ALLY TO ANOTHER

Gradually Phi Phuon acquired the reputation of being a courageous man, who demonstrated self-sacrifice and was able to submit to authority in favour of a collective cause. Such was the statement, he said, made be the Vietnamese and later on by the Khmer rebels who started establishing their headquarters in the remote forests of Ratanakiri. He was a person who could be entrusted with the most diverse missions, such as that of tracker, conveyor, guide and finally messenger. He benefitted from this aura among the Viet Minh who would introduce him to the Khmer communists. He first met Bang Sim (aka Bang Man) and Bang Vy in 1964. From what he heard, these two were the first Khmer representatives of the Cambodian revolutionary movement to settle in Ratanakiri.[150] The first was tall and stout, while the second, also tall, was much slimmer. They were regularly accompanied by three older Vietnamese executives, Ong Savaing, Ong Leaing and Ong Beuk. Bang Sim arrived at Veunsai and had basic accommodation built for himself with a separate office near an inexhaustible source of water, three kilometres from the village. He lived there with his wife, two daughters (Samm and Sam) and his son (Doh). As for Bang Vy, he lived not far from Bang Sim in the district of Veunsai then, for logistical reasons in order to cover the whole province, he settled in Bokeo District.

The two men and their families made a living from farming. They grew rice and potatoes, as well as bananas, papaya and sugar cane. They raised pigs and poultry and set traps to capture the abundant game. Both were also engaged in hunting deer and fallow deer in a manner similar to that pursued by the indigenous inhabitants. Without bicycles, they walked around like the locals and were not

[150] Bang Sim was recognized by the indigenous populations as the Khmer precursor of the revolution in Ratanakiri. He was shot dead during a mission in 1974 in Preah Vihear. His wife died in 2013.

reluctant to travel long distances and carry heavy loads themselves. Bang Sim and his family talked some Jarai. Phi Phuon did not yet understand Khmer. A young bilingual Jarai, Bang Laè, acted as an interpreter. With them Phi Phuon began his new activities of guide and subsequently messenger.

It was the Vietnamese who entrusted him with his duties because they had already seen him at work as a tracker and messenger. They appreciated his dedication and intimate knowledge of the geography of the region. Phi Phuon also knew how to locate Viet Minh sanctuaries by moving from one camp to another. His travels led him to stay at the office O' Ampor-Kuliv near the first foothills of Mount Ngâk, then in the region of the Dragon's Tail located at the north-eastern end of the province, at the junction of the border between the three countries (Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam).[151]

**The short-term alliance between Viet Minh and Khmer Rouge**

As soon as they were installed, the Viet Minh Front consisting of militaries and political advisers, began, in 1963 and 1964, to organize study seminars where lessons were given on politics, health and guerrilla warfare[152]. They urged the participants to prepare for a long-term political struggle closely associated with an armed struggle. Phi Phuon was keen to attend all these events. One of the very first meetings he attended with the Viet Minh and their Cambodian associates took place at the end of 1964. He recalled the essence of their warning, "Now with us the Revolution is coming to you. Be ready to raise your banner high and to lead the fight resolutely to achieve it. Triumph!".

[151] In 1979, three thousand Khmer Rouge fighters took refuge in a place in the 'Dragon's Tail' called Chak York. In 2016, this region dotted with high mountains was still uninhabited and difficult to access. Sources: Rocham Tveng and other residents of *Phum* Lom, 2017.

[152] William J. Duiker has revealed thanks to the declassified Vietnamese archives that the division of the Indochinese Communist party into three separate bodies did not mean that Hô Chi Minh and his colleagues had lost interest with Cambodia and Laos. There were testimonies of continued alliance and support, at least up to the late sixties and even if driven by the Vietnamese, for arm supply, guerilla techniques (the Viet Minh themselves had previously received subsequent warfare training by Chinese officers) and political ideology. See: William J. Duiker, *op. cit.* pp. 438-439.

It was up to Khmer officials to take the initiative to set up rest stations for messengers in the villages. As Phi Phuon set himself up east of Andoung Pich, between the Sé San River and the Vietnamese border, he was helping to establish these safe havens, by identifying host families in which he could have complete confidence, at *Phum* Châk and *Phum* Nay. As a general rule, it took between one or two days of walking to get from one rest station to another. Those destined to become messengers were reminded, in study seminars, to be vigilant with the material they transported. The insertion of coded dispatches into bamboo tubes intended for the Viet Minh turned into a veritable art of concealment. Information flowed both ways: Viet Minh officers handed over coded dispatches to Jarai, Lao and Kachoh' messengers who put them in the same tubes to convey Vietnamese information to the leaders of the Khmer movement. Everything suggests that the Vietnamese-Khmer alliance between the future Khmer Rouge leaders and the Viet Minh was at its peak at this point, but the indigenous populations, as well as the Viet Minh rulers, did not realize that it was only a temporary, if not counterfeit, alliance.

Revolutionary training sessions intensified from 1963 onwards and became more systematic with the arrival of the Khmer Rouge dissidents who returned to resistance in Phnom Penh and the rest of the country from the mid-1960s.[153] The early sessions intended to mobilize the population were organized by the Viet Minh and some Cambodians like Bang Sim. They took place in the three districts of the province. Annual and then semi-annual meetings brought regional managers together to prepare collaborative action. They talked about planning and starting

[153] From the end of 1966, the American bombardments intensified particularly in the border region of Memot (province of Kratie) in Cambodia and on the Vietnamese side, where, for several months, the base camp had housed Pol Pot and his supporters. The base camp, known as Base Camp 100 of the Communist Party of Kampuchea, was subsequently relocated to the east of Ratanakiri province. According to Sara Colm, quoted by Margareth Slocomb (*op. cit*., p. 11), the wooded and remote province "constituted a logical place of establishment for Pol Pot anxious to establish the first popular rallying base" in a predominantly non-Khmer province that suffered brutality from administrators and the royal army, especially land confiscation and high taxation as well as politics of assimilation. The choice of the new location, rich in natural resources and close to Viêt Nam, also allowed the easy establishment of military training camps and carefully identified places to host seminars on political indoctrination and initiation into guerrilla warfare. It is not impossible that the future Khmer Rouge leaders choose deliberately a forested area which was inhabited by indigenous peoples who, like their counterparts in Viêt Nam had bitter experiences with earliest attempts of assimilation. For the association between ethnic Nung and Hô Chi Minh in the 1940s, see William J. Duiker, *op. cit*., pp. 249-251),

to organize the integration of activities in the province. The meetings were held with small numbers of participants in each district called to amalgamate with the others.

As far as Phi Phuon could remember, the first political education sessions organized by the Khmer communists were held in *Phum* Patay, in what is now Bokeo district. From 1967 they were chaired by Ieng Sary. These meetings were reserved for future local officials—the *kamaphibal*—destined to serve as a combatant cadre, leaders of men, political commissars or heads of popular communes (*sahakor*). Another political seminar was held in 1968 near O' Kab in the eastern part of the province. Four people, including the then 20-year-old Phi Phuon, were responsible for sending the messengers to summon the guests and, more problematically, to discreetly prepare the logistics of the meeting without attracting undue attention. The program of this seminar took stock of both the international and the national situation. It then informed participants about current activities in the province. The meeting lasted three days Speeches were given in Lao although interpreters were present. Bang Sim was one of the main Khmer facilitators of this meeting. These meetings and conferences that followed illustrated the nature of popular engagement in which participation of every citizen of Ratanakiri was emphasized. Seminars lasting several days or even a month were held under the shelter of trees or bunkers to teach war techniques and politics.

The sessions of the political seminars started changing from 1967 onwards. In comparison to those, more 'pan-communist' made along with the Viet Minh, they were about to pay more attention on Cambodian future. The slogans became oriented towards the country, "With the support of the country people, we have everything", "The people are the source of all goods", "The working class is overexploited", "the working and peasant class is the driving force, but we must also bring together the other elements of society as individuals and as a class", "Taking power is one thing, but keeping it is much more difficult", "Long live peaceful, neutral and non-aligned Kampuchea", "Long live the great people of Kampuchea". Various accounts, including that of Phi Phuon and some of his Jarai friends, confirm that Pol Pot never said "Khmer", but "people of Kampuchea", perhaps so as not to offend indigenous peoples. Party members learned to be self-sufficient, to rely on their own strengths, and were instructed, via Pol Pot's oral translations from French into Khmer, in the texts of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin and

Mao Tse Tung, the latter evoking the notion of people's war. As the unstable and unsecure military situation dictated, books sometimes had to be thrown away or burned. But Pol Pot still had many paper works and books at his disposal. He also taught songs he had composed. For example, some dedicated to the glory of intrepid messengers. He didn't greet people with folded hands, but shook their hands in the Western style, with his fine "petit-bourgeois schoolboy" hands. During the day, he would inquire about the peasants' living conditions, check on the digging of sock puppets, the manufacture of poisoned arrows, or the making of 36 piston rifles. These rifles were made up of spare parts bought by the dozen or so tubes in three markets available in the province, run by three or four revolutionary Chinese merchants. At the end of 1967, the Party had only a hundred or so rifles at its disposal, and the soldiers moved around on foot.

So, progressively, the convention proposed smoothly by the Viet Minh gave way to a *sine qua non* Cambodian membership. For the first time the notion of "traitor" towards those who remained on the government side was used. Speakers, including Ieng Sary and then Pol Pot, aka Ta Pouk, asked guests to join in a ruthless struggle against the Americans who were bombarding the population and against the Royalist troops who were showing ruthlessness on the ground. This struggle was also to be made against the citizens of the country who were accomplice with the enemies from outside.

The two men pointed out that their struggle was distinguished from the Khmer *Serei* who were fiercely anti-communist. Mobilization had to be collective and continuous. After the call for ideological rallying, the second part of the seminars was devoted to the strategic implementation of actions in the field. Phi Phuon admitted that, at this time, the indigenous insurgents were still poorly established and did not always know how to lead or what types of intervention to favour. Which is, after all, understandable: one doesn't become a guerrilla overnight. Young people especially took time to develop. The lectures were preceeded by practical questions. For example, they asked the assembly how they planned to react if they came across enemies. Guerrilla techniques, including: knowledge of the environment, ability to navigate without being spotted, discretion, ambush, trap, and espionage, were highlighted.

Another important conference chaired by Ieng Sary and attended by Phi Phuon was held at the beginning of 1968. It brought together some sixty local executives from

the northeast. The participants were mainly young adults, on average just over twenty years old. Only one woman, of Lao origin, was present. The program consisted of the basic teachings of Marxism-Leninism, so basic that Phi Phuon admitted to remembering nothing apart from a few tirelessly repeated slogans, such as that of ‘social class’ and ‘imperialism’, but which remained a bit abstract to himself and his comrades. Documents written in Laotian and Khmer were distributed. Teaching stopped at nightfall for fear that the light would be spotted by the US and Cambodian air forces. They were always wary of the bombardments that could happen at any time.

Written files dealing with the demands of the moral situation of the troops were available. Obedience, integrity and bravery were considered essential qualities. The third phase of the seminar was a matter of general introspection: each of the participants was encouraged to take stock of their commitment and had to frankly discuss their flaws and doubts. We can detect the precursor of self-criticism sessions ...

The leaders' purpose was to reach a consensus and was intended to avoid disparate and fragmented initiatives. Speeches, orchestrated by the organizers, were given in the morning, followed by presentations from representatives of the three districts who reported on the situation in their home areas. The floor was then opened to the trainees in the afternoon. They were encouraged to provide details of their immediate surroundings and were free to add their personal opinions, even if that meant them being reformatted into the coveted ideological mould. The ensuing debates were meant to review theoretical, organizational and technical considerations of armed struggle. Phi Phuon remembered a slogan engraved in gold letters under the leadership of Pol Pot. It was written that "No one should take dogmatic personal initiatives. Everyone must stealthily advance, like a wolf”. At the same time as the indoctrination of populations, which was carried out in waves from 1965 onwards, starting from these meetings, more and more people joined the revolutionary movement. According to Phi Phuon, the main cause of this rallying wave was linked to the intensification of the American bombardments. But the revolutionary contingent inclined to take up arms was not yet very large. Where was the enemy? As it was, it could only be seen in the sky. More than a year later, there was a significant increase in this contingent due to the relentless policy of "hunting down the Communists" inaugurated by Sihanouk that was spreading in the province. The enemy was no longer just in the sky but was clearly identifiable

and visible. Membership of the revolutionary cause intensified once again in 1967 following atrocities by the Royal Army such as those described above east of Bokeo. 1968 arrived with a resumption of the bombardments. Finally, the declaration of March 23, 1970 by Prince Norodom Sihanouk urging his Khmer compatriots, the "little peoples" as he used to call them, to join the maquis to fight the government of Lon Nol supported by the United States of America.[154] An old Tampuan woman recalled that, at that time, "the revolution was instilled everywhere in the province, in all the villages and among all the families".[155]

Moreover, from 1965 onwards many young adults in Ratanakiri were particularly impressed and fascinated by the Vietnamese combatants. The latter were all well-armed, remarkably disciplined and very determined to devote themselves body and soul to their Revolution, and that of others. The example they showed and the skilful propaganda they contributed undoubtedly led to the development and acceleration of the revolutionary process in the province of Ratanakiri, as in other regions of the country where they infiltrated.

Phi Phuon remembered that the Vietnamese kept repeating to the local populations that "the Vietnamese, Cambodian and Lao peoples are brothers who share the same grain of rice and the same ear of pigment. That is why they must unite to fight a common enemy, namely American imperialism and its henchmen." And that they said "... after the liberation of South Vietnam, we will help you to free the Cambodian people from exploitation". The Viet Minh cadres constantly warned against ideological carelessness by arguing that "if the political mobilization is insufficient, your country will experience the same kind of war as ours between the north and the south, as well as against foreign countries that attack us"[156].

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[154] The news was announced, or rather confirmed, by the Khmer Rouge executives, in particular Bang Sim who had a transistor radio. He used to listen to the Voice of America (VOA). Others say there were no surprises. Brao met in Ratanakiri (March 1995), informed by the Communist Khmers who had returned to rebellion, maintained that the coup has been brewing for several months. Some dignitaries of the ethnic minorities of Ratanakiri who rallied to the revolutionary cause were already aware of the imminent change of regime. The timeliness of the event suggests the possibility of an alliance between the Khmer Rouge and the deposed prince, which does, indeed, happen.

[155] Interview, Tampuan woman, *Phum* Malik, Andong Meas district, March 2016.

[156] Words repeated in this way by Phi Phuon, February 2015.

According to the testimonies gathered over the years most, but not all, residents welcomed these words. Devoting your life to a revolutionary cause means giving up, temporarily at least or perhaps permanently, your family life and town and there were many who did not want it. Those who tactfully opposed it due to domestic reasons were not subject to any pressure of military engagement. Both Phi Phuon and his brother were not aware of any cases of forced indoctrination or compulsory recruitment of adolescents against the advice of families or relatives. For the young who decided to enlist, the parents, usually with the backing of paternal and maternal relatives, eventually accepted that their offspring volunteer to serve in the ranks of the insurgents. Phi Phuon was unaware of any parental veto, especially since the decision to take up arms was more common among sons than among daughters.

## The arrival of Khmer Rouge intellectuals

*Back to the early establishment of the Khmer Rouge in the province*

The Anduong Pich district, from which Phi Phuon hails, was one of the first places of residence for Communist dissidents who went underground in 1963 and 1964, a year or so before the arrival of the future Khmer Rouge leaders in 1965. The vast majority of Jarai, Kachoh' and Laotians (living on the banks of the Sé San River) living there did not flee during the first years of contact with the Khmer Rouge, unlike the Brao living further north in the Taveng region. Indeed, from 1967 and especially 1968, the latter began to move away from their traditional habitat, settling in the northern forests that were difficult for the Khmer Rouge partisans to reach. This initial withdrawal of the Brao would later turn, as the political situation hardened and bombing intensified, into migration across the border into Laos. The Laotians, and above all the Kachoh', were able to take advantage of the rice-field apprenticeship encouraged by the Khmer Rouge cadres, practising it freely and without any collective arrangements, at least until 1970.

The northern district of Taveng was also one of the Khmer Rouge's first secret settlements, from 1965 until 1970. Pol Pot and Khieu Shampan (the future president during the Khmer Rouge regime from 15 April 1975 to early January 1979) are said to have visited here on several occasions, but never for more than a few weeks, usually just a few days. A large detachment of soldiers was stationed

here[157]. The Taveng area was close to Vietnamese garrisons, which the Khmer Rouge had to contain, despite the provisional alliance between the two parties—an alliance the Khmer Rouge wanted to get rid of as soon as possible for fear of being absorbed and dominated by the Vietnamese communists. Subsequent testimonies that I gathered from the mid-1990s onwards come to an agreement that the vast majority of *Khamapibal* cadres, security groups and political leaders were of Khmer origin, not indigenous. Furthermore, the contingent of Cambodian soldiers recruited in Taveng by the *Khamapibal* had the task of raising awareness among ethnic minorities of their precarious living conditions. Catchphrases like "You only eat roots", "your life is miserable", "the government is taking advantage of you" are just some of the slogans tirelessly repeated. The propaganda, simply formulated, brooks no debate. Many people of Brao origin - women, men and children - are murdered when the *khamapibal* and their *nokorbal* acolytes (public security forces) notice that some peasants seem recalcitrant to the indoctrination. As elsewhere in the province, several villages began to be deserted as soon as the first contacts with the Khmer Rouge were made. It will intensify later when more families, notably Jarai, Brao and Kreung, escape to Viêt Nam or Laos between 1970 and 1974, only to return in 1979**.**

In the early 1970s, the Khmer Rouge led by the *khamapibal* who were to be stationed in Ratanakiri Province set up their headquarters seven or eight kilometres south of Ban Lung (the nowadays provincial capital), in the former *khum* known as Bantang. As the new capital grows in size and the last fighting rage with the Royal Army, the rebels move a little further south, positioning themselves at *Phum* Sedao, on the banks of the Sré Pok River, not far from the border with Mundolkiri Province. This southern area is nevertheless of less strategic and economic interest: there is little population along the river, and it is difficult to exploit the forest and transform it into irrigated rice fields, as expected by the Khmer Rouge agriculture development project[158]. On the way down to Lumphat - the administrative capital established by the *Sangkum* under the reign of Norodom Sihanouk – some villages of Kreung and Brao are to be found. There, the Khmer Rouge set up recruitment bases in various places. Inhabitants are forcibly conscripted, sometimes as farm

[157] No historical source is in position to give a precise account of the recruits, as well as on their ethnic (Khmer/non Khmer) origin.

[158] Khieu Samphan (2004), *L'histoire récente du Cambodge et mes prises de position*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 172 p.

workers, sometimes as soldiers, sometimes as *nokorbal* responsible for imposing a strict discipline on the rest of the population. In order to avoid ‘unnecessary’ sentimental and emotional feelings, the recruited soldiers and the *nokorbal* are sent to another village, frequently to a far distant village, if possible inhabited by another ethnic group. Adolescents, female or male, whose age is not very precise but whose physical strength has been evaluated by recruiters, are asked to be part of the mobile forces (*kong chalat*). If not, they become *chivapol* (living forces) and they are expected to be unconditional supporters of the Khmer Rouge Regime. Ideologically and according to a new lifestyle imposing a rupture of the past, of their past. A major change from that moment onward is detachment from the mother, the father and the siblings. they do not stay anymore with their family and other relatives. The destiny of the younger ones is not better insofar some who stayed home are trained to spy their parents. Traditional kinship relations switch to *Angkar* exclusive relations. Blind obedience replaces acts of exchange and testimonies of solidarity and former camaraderie.

Another forest area, known as the Parrot Forest, not far from *khum* Labang moui, with rubber plantations dating back to the early 1960s, is also, according to villagers interviewed in the mid-1990s, a stronghold of the Polpotists, who are once again sent to firmly 'educate' the Brao and Tampuan people in order to convert them to their ideology, starting with *tosu noyobai*, which is the theory of political struggle and attack against the *Sangkum* Army. There are few alternatives: either the families adhere and are considered 'worthy' *mulethan* (grassroots people), or they are assimilated to traitors, corrupted by the assimilation process carrying out by the *Sangkum*. And their fate becomes uncertain. Even the indigenous persons first considered as *mulethan* are scrupulously controlled. For a large part of the local population, insubordination is impossible, not thinkable. Flight becomes the only possible recourse. But not everyone succeeds. Apart from those who view with confidence the future and accept to join the revolution, there are those who don't dare, and among those who try, there are those who are caught in the act and immediately exterminated. In the midst of these fleeing groups of people who manage to elude ruthless surveillance, it's not uncommon to find dissident Khmer Rouge soldiers who support, accompany and take them elsewhere. The few testimonies gathered in the province during my investigations over more than ten years estimate that at least a hundred Khmer Rouge soldiers have deserted. Most

of them have the advantage of being militarily equipped, and therefore able to confront the other non-dissident Khmer Rouge who are hunting them down.

*The Khmer Rouge leadership*

Until 1963, the future leaders of the Kampuchea Democratic lived in the city, mostly in the capital Phnom Penh, although the Cambodian Communist Party had branches in the countryside to the east and south-west, which were Cambodia's poorest regions. From then on, Saloth Sâr, the future Pol Pot, newly appointed Party Secretary, took refuge with part of the Standing Committee in the East, near Kompong Cham province, sometimes in South Vietnam. Until 1965, the Cambodian party's base, called Office 100, moved back and forth across the border as the military situation changed. Then, when Saloth Sâr, Keo Meas[159] and other Communists spent several months in Hanoi and Peking[160], the Party leaders settled for the first time among Cambodians alone, apparently on the advice of the Vietnamese and under the responsibility of Ieng Sary and Nuon Chea, in the north-east, in Ratanakiri Province, close to Vietnamese bases and, at least at that time, far from American bombing, but in a very malaria endemic area. Other sections of the Party, including five hundred people, fled the repression and expropriations of 1967 in the Kompong Cham region, before joining the first withdrawal zones. But key cadres such as Saloth Sâr and Ieng Sary were to live for almost four years among the indigenous peoples living in the forest, commonly referred to by Prince Norodom Sihanouk as 'Khmer lœu' (Khmers from above).

The years 1967 and 1968 represent a decisive turning point for the development of the revolution. Phi Phuon mentioned the existence of four Khmer *Neak Thom* (important people) in Ratanakiri whom he knew personally. First there were Bang Sim and Bang Vy, already present since 1963-1964, long before Bang Vann (a pseudonym of Ieng Sary during his time at Ratanakiri) and Bang Pouk (a pseudonym of Saloth Sâr, better known later as Pol Pot) came into the picture. These two

[159] Keo Meas was a Cambodian communist politician. Keo Meas, then a fourth-year student at the Phnom Penh Teachers Training College, was recruited by the Indochinese Communist Party in 1946. Later, in 1950, he became a leading figure within the United Issarak Front.
[160] Philip Short ((2004*), Pol Pot : The History of a Nightmare*, op. cit.

arrived in 1965 and 1967[161] respectively. Bang Sim and Bang Vy, belonging to the Central Committee, were sent by the Communist Party *Pracheachun* with the aim of forming underground armed groups. Ieng Sary made a number of trips to Ratanakiri from 1965 but Phi Phuon did not meet him until 1967. He landed in Jarai territory accompanied by his bodyguard, a Tampuan called Thin. He was first greeted by Comrade Loen, another Tampuan from Steung Treng. At the end of 1966 Ieng Sary took the initiative to create office 102. This base camp was built by Jarai in the forest not far from *Phum* Khaet, the birthplace of Phi Phuon. Office 102, once in service, included three Jarai as attached staff acting as close bodyguards: 30-year-old Bang Mali from *Phum* Chay, 22-year-old Bang Pheng from *Phum* Chay, and finally 19-year-old Phi Phuon. The latter was mentored by his brother-in-law, a man named Loen. All of these Jarai had already benefited from the political influence of Ong Savaing, one of the experienced Vietnamese crew who accompanied and introduced most of the new Khmer revolutionaries based or passing through Ratanakiri to the population.[162]

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[161] Kreung veteran combatants (that I met in November 1994 south of the new capital Ban Lung), said that Pol Pot accompanied by a small escort of guides and bodyguards, two of them ethnic Tampuan, spent a few days this year in one of their villages, after passing through Kratie and Steung Treng Provinces

[162] Other future Khmer Rouge leaders would take to the bush in Ratanakiri, starting with Son Sen and his wife Yun Yat, and Khieu Ponnary (Pol Pot's first wife). Nuon Chea made a brief appearance in 1969 to meet Pol Pot in secret (the guide and messenger Net Savan, in Mondulkiri, in March 2016 declared before the Khmer Rouge Tribunal, having been a guide for Khieu Ponnary as well as for Nuon Chea). To this day no one knows for sure what their discussions really meant. Saloth Ban (aka So Hong, as a revolutionary name), the nephew of Pol Pot presently living in Malai in Bantey Meanchey Province, argues that the two men met to divide their roles: Pol Pot would take care of the affairs of the countryside and Nuon Chea, speaking Thai, Vietnamese and Chinese, would be in charge of the city's affairs. He had the advantage of not being included on the list of 34 undesirable people, labelled as “34 subversives”, established by Sihanouk in 1967, which instructed the political police to track down, torture and kill communist opponents of the regime (see: Timothy Michael Carney (1978), *Communist party power in Kampuchea (Cambodia): documents and discussion*, data paper number 106, New York, Southeast Asia program department of Asian studies Cornell university, Ithaca, 80 p.). Khieu Samphan the future Khmer Rouge president, and Hou Youn appeared on the list but they took the maquis outside Ratanakiri. Nuon Chea was said to be in contact with provincial urban centers from Phnom Penh, where he was living temporarily on his return. Pol Pot’s nephew, Saloth Ban, (who became “So Hong” when he joined the maquis) came to Ratanakiri in 1969: he left on foot from the town of Kratie and took a month to reach Lumphat. He then lived in the Ratanakirian Office 100 with his uncle Pol Pot.

Phi Phuon vividly remembered his first encounter with the man. Tall and rather slim, Ieng Sary was fair-skinned and easily mistaken for a foreigner, particularly because he spoke with a strong accent, characteristic of Cambodians born in South Vietnam. The first time he showed himself to the Jarai in office 102, he wore black pants and a white shirt with, in the left pocket, a small notebook and two ballpoint pens, one in blue ink and the other in red ink. He walked with the help of a cane, swinging both arms, his back a little hunched, a rucksack on his back. Under a somewhat harsh appearance (unlike Pol Pot he was rarely seen smiling, let alone joking), he favoured persuasion rather than coercion, preferring to convince rather than to compel. He was very quickly, recognized as a speaker deserving of respect. He regularly tuned to world news, especially the B.B.C. in Vietnamese. He always recorded the main international events in his notebook. He did the same when Phi Phuon told him about his actions during the five days, on average, that his missions as conveyor or messenger lasted. Ieng Sary led a simple and well-ordered life. He got up very early in the morning and went to bed very late, around midnight. He maintained cordial and respectful relations with his fellow fighters, the villagers he visited, as well as with all ethnic minorities, although at first, he seemed a little confused by their lifestyles. He showed curiosity and asked many questions about the living conditions, practices and work organization of the inhabitants. He listened attentively and in his little notebook carefully documented what was reported to him. Phi Phuon had a long conversation with him in May 1967 when he visited a Jarai service in Lvang Sos village. Ieng Sary first inquired about his state of health and that of his fellow workers before asking how long they had been living there. As Phi Phuon did not yet understand Khmer, he communicated through Lœn, a Jarai interpreter. He told him that they had been in that particular hideout for over a year. The future delegate for international relations continued his questioning by asking if the three Jarai present there were familiar with the geography of the place and its surroundings. Such qualities are indeed worth noting.

Two months after his arrival, Ieng Sary, alias *Bang* Vann, summoned around sixty executives and future executives, supposed to constitute the first framework of the Chivapol supporters, bringing together all the ethnic minorities from the northeast (Jarai, Tampuan, Lao, Kachoh', Kreung, Brao, Kaveth and Lun). There was only one woman at this political studies seminar which took place in his office 102 not far from the Sé San River. At this time Phi Phuon also became the bodyguard of Bang

Lœn, a Jarai like him. During the meeting Vann asked if any of the guests knew where the headquarters of the Vietnamese revolutionary forces were located. Phi Phuon pretty much knew it. His intrepid character pushed him to respond positively before the others. His interlocutor announced to him in front of the whole audience that he was going to entrust him with an important mission: to take a message to the Vietnamese leaders, a message properly placed in a bamboo tube. Vann insisted on the confidential nature of his request. He had to be convinced that the appointed messenger was able to find where the Viet Minh commanders lived without going astray as there were many other Vietnamese around who were not supposed to know the final destination of the secret message. Phi Phuon did not retract but preferred to add, as a precaution, that he was not sure of anything. He said he knew that Viet Minh leaders had a four-digit code that had to be recognized. He added, by way of persuasion, that the mission was certainly difficult, but with the diligence and perseverance that characterized him since his childhood, he would achieve the desired result. Phi Phuon remembered, with pride, Ieng Sary's reply: "If you succeed in this mission, I will entrust you with others ... many actions fundamental to the success of our movement will depend on you".[163]

Phi Phuon was, therefore, charged with a new function, that of messenger for important missions. In this case it took more than five days to complete his mission. On the first day he returned empty-handed because he forgot part of the code allowing him to locate himself geographically. Ditto the second day which ended in failure. On the third and fourth day, it was still impossible for him to reach the goal: despite his knowledge of the local paths, he had to avoid being spotted and felt compelled to turn back at the sound of unfamiliar noises. But he knew that taking risks was part of the daily challenge faced by men of his calibre. On the fifth day, Ieng Sary called on him to push ever further north on the multi-branched track in order to find the central rallying base between Viet Minh and Viet Cong. Not only did he succeed without hindrance, but he investigated, on his own initiative, their supply logistics and their organizational arrangements in the forest. He discovered that the Vietnamese revolutionaries were installed all along the eastern tracks of

[163] On this occasion it was his older brother who acted as his interpreter since he did not yet speak Khmer. On the other hand, he knew a few words in Vietnamese like "to eat" or "where are you going?" or “I got lost” and above all the key sentence “I want to go to Headquarters”.

the Hô Chi Minh trail[164] and according to the information gleaned here and there during his successive missions, he estimated that there were about five thousand men in 1967 just in Ratanakiri Province. Such information on Vietnamese troop numbers was, in fact, secretly desired by the Khmer Rouge leaders who already considered them as temporary companions in arms but intruders.

The first Viet Minh contingents crossed the Cambodian border in this region at the beginning of the sixties.[165] Their camps were in areas about three hundred meters from the track. The permanent base camps were surrounded by trenches about 1.50 meters deep and surrounded by barbed wire. The troops who prepared the ground cleared the undergrowth, but conserved the large trees to avoid being spotted by aircraft. Having arrived in this region, Phi Puon saw many hammocks and tents, but no huts or cabins. Most of the facilities were underground. He managed to recognize his destination thanks to the encrypted code. He handed the bamboo, about forty centimetres long, to a tall, light-skinned Vietnamese man obviously coming from the north. He waited for almost an hour for the answer. He was urged to eat and had to wait longer than expected during which time he rested, scanned the surroundings and watched the men go about their business. The man who received the message in the afternoon returned early the next day. He came with Phi Phuon to a refuge occupied by a few Jarai, a three hour walk from the Viet Minh camp.[166]

Phi Phuon admitted, however, that he didn't know Ieng Sary well in Ratanakiri.[167] His relationship with him hardly involved dialogue and was limited to instructions. He met him regularly, but fleetingly and rarely face to face. The latter summoned him essentially when missions were assigned to him. During his exile in the forests of the north, Ieng Sary contented himself with giving him instructions, usually

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[164] At that time, the Hô Chi Minh Trail covered an immense area. Most of them passed through southern Laos in the region already under control by the Pathet Lao (provinces of Champassak and Attapeu) and spread to Cambodia from west to east, from Steung Treng to Ratanakiri.

[165] It seems, according to Rocham Tveng, that these trenches can still be found in some places today.

[166] Traces of the Vietnamese encampment, installed since 1965, would still exist today (in 2015) and, according to him, currently serve as the headquarters of the 5th or 7th Military District of the Vietnamese People's Army.

[167] He is closer to him after the "liberation" (sic) of Phnom Penh on April 15, 1975 when the young Jarai assumed his function as security officer at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

succinctly and without going into too much detail, thus leaving a wide scope for imagination and creativity in putting into practice any decision. At least that is what Phi Phuon thought. Ieng Sary emphasized the art of leadership and compliance. An essential quality was to strictly follow instructions before making any decision to modify them in the event of danger or unforeseen circumstances. The first, intellectual, approach came down to apprehending a given situation, considering its ramifications, without ever altering or distorting it. The success of the mission took priority over human safety (it being understood that Phi Phuon did not fall into the category of leaders). The second step consisted in a concrete analysis of the facts in an objective way by comparing favourable and unfavourable aspects of the situation before putting forward a changed proposal worthy of the name with a view to reaching a solution. One of the most fashionable slogans, dear to Pol Pot and his cronies, was to cry "One hand to cultivate rice and the other to hold a gun".

Ieng Sary most often stayed in office 102. The latter was a short day's walk from office 100 (northeast of Talao commune, near Vietnam) where Pol Pot, better known then under the nickname of Ta Pouk, was established. The latter, surrounded by his first local bodyguards armed with Kalashnikov AK 47's and rifles, arrived in Ratanakiri in December 1967 with comrades Vin (alternatively referred to as Chim Sam Aok or Pâng which was his revolutionary name), Dam, Khan and Thin. Apart from Pâng, the other three men were from Ratanakiri. In the absence of footpaths, it took three to four days of difficult walking from Phi Phuon's Refuge Office to reach Pol Pot's Office 100[168]. After spending months in Viêt Nam, probably in a location controlled by the South Vietnamese National Liberation Front[169], he finally decided to settle in his homeland for fomenting his own revolution.

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[168] After Pol Pot became elected as secretary of the Communist Party of Kampuchea in February 1963, he decided like many others who were identified as communists (already called "Khmer Rouge" by Norodom Sihanouk), to take refuge at a Vietnamese military base also called "Office 100", located in Viêt Nam nearby the city of Memot (Kratie Province in the northeast). He stayed there till mid1965 and walked up to the Ho Chi Minh Trail to Hanoi for talks with the North Vietnamese. He then proceeded to China (according to some sources he went also to North Korea), and finally came back to Cambodia where he established his new camp, called in the same way "Office 100" in the eastern part of Ratanakiri, not very far, as the crow flies, from the Vietnamese border.

[169] The southern insurgent group formally held a secret conference with representatives of various strata of South Viêt Nam society in December 20, 1960. It will be depicted as a historical event. According to William J. Duiker (*op. cit.*, pp. 525-527), "the meeting took place [in the liberated area] in densely forested area of rubber plantation along the Cambodian border, an area that would later serve has the headquarters of the Party's military command in the South.

Shortly after his arrival in early 1968, Pol Pot contracted malaria. In the absence of appropriate care on site and in view of his worsening condition, the inhabitants of the villages of Krâleng, Katê, Mloek and Kak took turns carrying him in a palanquin to Viêt Nam. They crossed the border and entrusted him to a hospital run by the Viet Minh. He remained bedridden for two weeks. Once recovered, a group of Jarai, including Phi Puon, met him and escorted him back to Office 100.

Aged 43, Pol Pot was a handsome man, well built, quite tall but rather thin and broad in face. He never raised his voice when he spoke, slowly articulating his words and accompanying them with a rather rigid smile. He wore a black shirt with white buttons with a notebook and two pen holders in his pocket. Outside of working hours, he sometimes joked. Everyone close to him remembers he had a sense of humour that added to his charisma. In Ratanakiri, no one remembered him raising his voice or getting angry. The social construction as a bloodthirsty tyrant that he would later be characterized to be in national and world opinion stands in stark contrast to the image he cleverly conveyed to the people of Ratanakiri.

Pol Pot slept on a woven bamboo bed without a mattress and used his bundle as a pillow. He had a blanket, mosquito net, towel and a *krâma (the traditional Cambodian* scarf*)*. He also had a hammock. He mainly ate soup with dried, cooked fish and drank only boiled water. Dam was a trained nurse, acting as a doctor, from the *Sangkum* era who served as his general practitioner. When the villagers heard turtledoves singing, Ta Pouk (Pol Pot) did not fail to ask the people around him if they knew this bird well and if some people could communicate with it.

He was amazed that the peasants of the forest, a subject of contempt among the Khmers of the plains, had managed in such a context to lead a life worthy of the name without any outside help. He cited, as an example, the construction of vast bamboo houses whose various elements are constructed without nails but with lianas. Likewise, he did not fail to let them know that being able to obtain daily supplies from nature with leaves, plants, fruits, wild animals and fish aroused his amazement and admiration. Moreover, women knew how to give birth without a midwife or doctor. Men and women knew of many plants with therapeutic virtues. Pol Pot took notes, accompanied people, discussed with them, and observed their technical knowledge. He behaved, in a way, like a young aspiring ethnographer! He once confided to Phi Phuon and his colleagues that his presentations and his

comments on a given situation or on a particular subject on the life of ethnic minorities could serve as a lesson for the Khmers.[170] Faced with the deprivations and difficulties of life to which Jarai were exposed in these times of war, he could not help but worry about the effects these material difficulties may have had on individuals. On the other hand, he never failed to express his admiration for his "compatriots" (as he called them), the ethnic minorities. In time, he became more attentive to technical innovations than to local knowledge and folklore. For example, natural materials that can be used to rapidly erect a shelter for the night in the rainy season. How to hide in the forest in the event of an incongruous presence, how to defend a base of support, or how to make makeshift weapons. He noticed that men spontaneously dug traps and planted stakes in the ground or made traps of all kinds. Other people erected a protective enclosure. He was aware that this indigenous knowledge could be used in times of guerrilla warfare ...

While Pol Pot, Ieng Sary, Bang Sim, and other Khmer cadres at this time maintained warm, and apparently respectful, relations with the forest peoples, the dismissive attitudes of Son Sen and his wife Yun Yat were somewhat different.[171] According to the unanimous comments of those who knew her (residents of *Phum* Lom interviewed between 2015 and 2017), this frail teacher was an outspoken authoritarian, who believed she knew everything. She did not hide her deep disdain for their lifestyle, their clothes, their houses or their superstitions. A son-in-law of the older brother of Phi Phuon, whom he met in December 2015 in Ratanakiri, remembered, not without bitterness, having been appointed assistant or more exactly servant, not to say slave for almost one agricultural season, of this lady from Phnom Penh. “She had a primary mind. She did not deign to walk in the forest, she had to be carried constantly on the back of a man, on a stretcher or in a palanquin “... she kept complaining about having to live among us because we represented misery in its purest form”. “... she believed us incapable of thinking for ourselves and believed that we were by nature best destined to receive orders, provided they were simple and that tricked us”.

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[170] Pol Pot apparently wrote a 30-page report on the survival expertise and practices of the people of Ratanakiri. This document, which probably disappeared at an unknown time, was never accessible, either by his combatants or by his close relatives (information gathered in *Phum* Malai,Bantey Meanchey Province, February 2015)

[171] The same is true of Ta Mok—even worse according to Phi Phuon—who, although never having been to Ratanakiri, displayed his definitive distaste for "these savage peoples" (information from Phi Phuon and Saloth Ban, February 2015).

As a counterpoint to the armed struggle, the Khmer Rouge leaders organized rice productivity competitions. Phi Phuon proudly claimed to have been praised, together with his associates, on two occasions as an excellent cultivator. He specified that these competitions were based on established criteria (division of labour, sowing, diversity of cultivars, protection of crops, execution of the harvest, etc.) which were part of the revolutionary struggle which stipulated "one hand holds the gun and the other rice straw". This attainment of the complete man also demanded the inculcation of moral virtues such as team spirit, surpassing oneself, valuing the creative spirit, the recklessness and unity of the couple. This spirit of emulation emerged specifically from the Khmer Rouge and began under the leadership of Pol Pot from 1967. Starting from Andoung Pich, it spread throughout the province giving rise to competitions between the three districts. People exercising a responsible function (messenger, bodyguards, security guard, logistician) were entitled to financial compensation, however symbolic it may have been. Phi Phuon received, from 1967, 30 *riel* as a monthly fee, while women received 40 riel.[172] This money was barely sufficient to buy basic non-food products (soap, toothpaste, etc.) but held a highly prized value (recognition of the meritorious status of an accomplished combatant).

**The rapprochement between Pol Pot and Phi Phuon**

A decisive meeting between Pol Pot and Phi Phuon took place at the end of 1967. Ten days after the operation of sweeping up soldiers of the Cambodian Royal Army and the summary execution of revolutionary compatriots whom he had already met, Phi Phuon solicited a small group of Jarai, including the deputy mayor (*Mephum*) of *Phum* Katai who had a gun. He decided to ambush the Khmer Army battalion. He knew that an initiative had to be approved by higher authorities, but he ignored Pol Pot's instructions. Arriving on the sly nearby, the troop of revolutionaries watched their enemies' level the road with planks and blocks of stone. Phi Phuon and the others shot and injured and killed some soldiers. Then left immediately, taking small, poorly marked paths in the forest, knowing that they would quickly be out of reach and that, in any case, the government soldiers would not dare to follow them. Pol Pot learnt the news of the ambush in the first days of

[172] The equivalent of what a worker receives on a daily basis in the first large rubber plantation in Labansiek located south of the present-day provincial capital Ban Lung.

1968. He summoned Phi Phuon to O'Kop, not far from his office 100[173]. He asked him why he organized this attack without having received any orders and why he didn't report the news to whom it may concern. Phi Phuon, anxious to be firm, confident, enterprising but also respectful, justified himself by pointing out that he had only respected the spirit of the guerrillas aimed at protecting women and men from counter-revolutionaries. He told Pol Pot of the importance of building mobile guerrilla teams. The latter listened patiently and nodded without saying a word, a tight smile on his face.

At the end of the summer of 1968, the royalist troops were approaching dangerously close to the office 100 and the K-1 military training camp located further south commanded by Son Sen.[174] It was decided by the revolutionary Khmer Rouge elite to establish a new camp more than fifty kilometres to the north in the mountains near the 'Dragon's Tail', a nerve centre where the borders of the three countries (Viêt Nam, Laos, Cambodia) meet. The new base, called K-12, was near *Phum* Nay. It remained secret and even the Kachoh' villagers of Nay did not have access to the interior of the camp. Only some young men were asked to provide supplies and materials to build green huts.[175] K-12 was a three-day walk from a transit camp organized by the Viet Minh and located on the Laotian border, where one of the Hô Chi Minh Trail passed, and about ten kilometres from the Vietnamese border. Pol Pot, already perceived by partisans in Ratanakiri as the sole leader of the revolutionary Communist Khmer party, lived in seclusion for a time. He had his own private space, gave orders through intermediaries and rarely went out except with an escort. He had a small staff, including a cook, a doctor/nurse of Khmer origin and bodyguards who were the only ones allowed to live with him. Phi

[173] Office 100 was hidden in the forest, a few kilometers from the two Jarai, villages*, phum* Che and *phum* Moui. Some men from these villages have been asked to build small bamboo houses and to bring the needed basic material. A few of them turned to be the caretakers and protectors of Pol Pot and his Khmer acolytes. In normal time, the leaders requested not to be seen by others. They secretly stayed in the forest, move with appointed body guards but only those who were trusted were allowed to meet them in the refuge where they lived. For instance, there were a bell in the forest, a few hundred meters from Office 100, and when the food was brought to them, the bell would be hit so that the guard could be informed to take over the preparation. Only a few people in the village were loyal and trusted. Phi Phuon was quite young at that time, just a seventeen-year-old man, and he was not yet allowed to enter the camp.

[174] Philip Short*, op. cit*., p.176.

[175] Information gathered in *Phum* Talao from one of these former young people involved in the construction and supply of the Pol Pot entrenchment camp, February 2007.

Phuon was not yet part of this close troop, but he was one of the few outsiders to locate the refuge, and know who lived there and to whom to deliver some messages.

Guerrilla operations intensified as the royalist Army's interventions aimed at Communist insurgents also intensified. Various testimonies throughout the Province affirm that the Royal Army was regularly coming in the villages to check whether the Viet Cong troops were there, and to explore if local people were involved in the Revolution. Nevertheless, people were able to keep them in secret. The struggle against the Royal government had to be organized quickly and spread all over the province. Phi Phuon mainly dealt with logistics and housekeeping matters. He was not involved in military operations targeting the royal army and the few groups of villagers who supported it. He was assigned to the K7 munitions base, located near the Jarai Kamley village south of the Sé San River. It was a refuge, erected with bamboo, which acted as a resting place for the troops before they received further instructions to move. At the end of 1968, after the rainy season, the clashes on land were particularly virulent on Road 19, between Bokeo and the Vietnamese border, in particular in the district of Andoung Pich around Boloi where there was an insurgent entrenchment camp.

From 1969, government troops led by Colonel Sak Sutsakhan lacked military equipment. The rebels had weapons that were certainly old devices like piston rifles 36 (*kampleug kap*) and some AK47's, but these gave them an undeniable technical advantage compared to their old crossbows with limited range. At Andoung Pich, the rebels at this time had more than three hundred rifles with 120 bullets for each gun. The government's intention to push the Viet Minh, and especially their Khmer allies, back ended in dismal failure.[176] The Royal Army, however, recruited Tampuan, Lao, Kreung and Brao as both trackers and soldiers. But the deployment of this improvised battalion remained scattered, without any real military authority capable of taking matters in hand. What is more, this heterogeneous armed contingent was increasingly demotivated and realized its growing unpopularity.

[176] Sources indicate that Vietnamese forces were ordered not to fight directly against Lon Nol's troops but to engaged ethnic minorities in their stead. See Sara Colm, Pol Pot: the secrets 60's, building the "people's war" among the tribal communities, *Phnom Penh Post*, 24 April 1998, 7 (8), pp. 14-15.

Following the rapid devastation of the government army five Chinese businessmen (who later obtained refugee status in the US) and Vietnamese traders previously living in Bokeo, which quickly became a ghost town, took flight. A few weeks later, at the beginning of 1970, with the departure of the royal army, families of civilians close to the government managed to leave the province. These civilians and demobilized men, abandoned by a state authority now devoid of legitimacy, often accompanied by their nuclear relatives, became the first members of indigenous populations to obtain the status of political refugees bound for the United States of America.[177]

Towards the end of 1969, Pol Pot set off again towards Hanoi by taking one of the Hô Chi Minh Trails leading to little-discovered, safer and better marked trails. He arrived in China in the early 1970s, just before the overthrow of Sihanouk by the new Republican government formed by Lon Nol and Sirik Matak.[178] The journey

[177] The circumstances of deportation (support, logistics, American aid, etc.) remain contradictory and poorly understood, in the absence of my interviews. During my stays between 1994 and 2013 over a dozen Brao and Tampuan families who remained in Ratanakiri despite everything, described the hasty departure of one or more relatives fearing for their safety wanted by the Khmer Rouge revolutionaries. Others described the flight of from 3,000 to 4,000 of the inhabitants of Bokeo. These natives who refused to follow the revolutionary movement benefitted from American logistical support. Others managed to take refuge in the Vietnamese highlands. Some Brao people I met in April 2009 north of Taveng district showed me the addresses of their relatives who from 1970 had been living in the USA. They had not heard from them since their departure.

[178] According to historical sources mentioned by Sacha Sher *(op. cit*., P. 249), “the relations of the Cambodian communists with China began with the first visit of Pol Pot to Beijing in 1966. This stay of approximately three or four months, from February to April or May, until his return around September 1966 to Tay Ninh (camp 100), followed a nine-month stay in Viêt Nam (during the installation of camp 100) which began in June 1965. Pol Pot was going to return to China at the time of the *coup d'état* against Sihanouk in March 1970 (…) [at that time] he was still returning from Hanoi before returning to Ratanakiri in May”. According to the testimony of Leng Thirith, quoted by Sacha Sher, the main advantage of Pol Pot's first trip was "that Beijing was informed that there was an independent Cambodian Party and not just a Khmer branch of the Indochinese Communist Party". Another source, however, states that the collusion between Pol Pot and China dated back to 1960: while the Vietnamese communist leaders believed that Cambodia was not yet ready to make its own revolution, and therefore had to follow the path traced by the Viet Minh, a subsequent meeting between Pol Pot and members of the Chinese politburo would reassure the future Khmer Rouge leader. They approved and supported the path suggested by Pol Pot and his followers, consisting of making their own revolution not only politically, but using their own weapons. See on this subject: Viviane Frings (1997), Rewriting Cambodian History to

was long and risky because of the bombing and possibility of capture by spies in the pay of the anti-communist consortium imagined by the Khmer Rouge leaders (Khmer Serei, Lon Nol security forces, and mercenaries of all stripes). The journey took place in silence. Even in this moment of relative seclusion, the motto was 'look and listen and speak, as little as possible'.[179]

## "Make the revolution" yourself

A few Cambodians, who were still in the minority, however, were beginning to take a dim view of what they saw as Vietnamese entryism that it might be wise to curtail. A former Khmer Rouge remembers in retrospect "... They did not hesitate to behave in our country as in a conquered country. They set up their own camp there, their own administrative structure, their own hospitals, their own production units, fields, rice fields and vegetable gardens, their own pig, poultry and dog farms" [180]. His remark is probably correct, except that he forgot to specify that the health centres in question as well as the cultivated fields, vegetable gardens and livestock were not reserved for Viet Minh military troops only, but were accessible to the civilian population. Cambodians had no objection to benefiting from these situations.

It was at the end of the sixties when there appeared, it seems[181], a major divergence on the strategies envisaged by the Viet Minh and the Khmer Rouge. According to Phi Phuon, the former put pressure on the two leaders (Nuon Chea and Pol Pot) and their acolytes so that they did not launch too hastily, and especially on their own, a movement which must instead be planned, international and remotely guided from the outside by experienced politicians. The future Khmer Rouge leaders did not see it that way. They did not want to be relegated to the second rank and especially refused to be the vassals of the Vietnamese, Communists or not. In Ratanakiri, Khmer Rouge officials used the term *Yuon* to refer to unwanted Vietnamese. History resurfaces ...

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'adapt' It to a New Political Context: The Kampuchean People's Revolutionary Party's Historiography (1979-1991), *Modern Asian Studies*, 31 (4): 807-846.

[179] One of the accompanying guards was an acquaintance of Phi Phuon. Information in Malai, February 2015.

[180] The person, interviewed in March 2015 in a Tampuan village, requested anonymity.

[181] Michael Vickery, *op. cit.*; Philipp Short*, op. cit.*

It is very likely that this latent conflict was one of the major reasons for the trip to China, namely the search for a better concerted alliance with a new strong and consistent political partner. When Pol Pot returned from China in 1970, he took one of the other Hô Chi Minh Trails with a personal guard of three. They were greeted in Siem Pang (Steung Treng Province) by Phi Phuon and a handful of armed indigenous soldiers who led them to Ratanakiri. Phi Phuon was not yet Pol Pot's bodyguard. He was attached to the external security unit, but not to the so-called close guard which accompanied the leader on all walks and in an all-terrain jeep (although most journeys were made on foot).

Shortly after returning from China at the end of May 1970, the leaders of the revolution prepared to leave Ratanakiri. Time was ripe for spreading and organizing the insurrection at nationally. The troops of the royal army, totally disorganized and left to their own devices, finished evacuating the province[182], and it had been two months since Norodom Sihanouk was dismissed. Then began the long march towards the south which had for its destination Kratie followed by the north of Kompong Cham.

By this time Phi Phuon was part of Pol Pot's bodyguard. The expedition lasted more than a month and bought together 81 people, including 73 men from indigenous populations (all ethnic minorities being represented), two Khmer officials who had played the role of political instructors, and six representatives of the Khmer Rouge elite : Ieng Sary[183], Pol Pot and his first wife Khieu Ponnary, Son Sen and his wife Yun Yat, and Pol Pot’s nephew’s So Hong. A Lao guide named Chour led the convoy. Four elephants carried the bulk of the food and ammunition. Yun Yat still refused to walk “like a wild animal” (as she apparently complained) and two unlucky Jarai, including one I met in Andong Meas in March 2016, took turns carrying her in a

[182] The rest of the contingent, in a poor condition, was recalled to Phnom Penh. It would transit through Viêt Nam and then by boat from Hue, an ancient city near the ancient capital of the kingdom of Champa. Many deserted on the way, and a small number went so far as to join the ranks of the Khmer Rouge. Information revealed in January 2009 by a former soldier named Sarkhem, in his village, south Kandal Province.

[183] Ieng Thirith, Ieng Sary's wife, was then in charge of radio Kampuchea Democratic (KD). She temporarily lived in Hanoi. she became an influential figure in the Khmer Rouge, although she was neither a member of the Khmer Rouge Standing Committee nor of the Central Committee. She served as Minister of Social Affairs from October 1975 until the fall of the Khmer Rouge in January 1979.

palanquin! The convoy passed through Lumphat, the provincial capital already destroyed by American bombing raids, then headed south towards Koh Nhek in the centre of Mondulkiri Province, at that time an almost uninhabited area dotted with dry woodland. They then veered west, avoiding the provincial small capital Sen Monorom. They finally arrived at a command centre based not far from the Steung Chinit tributary in Kompong Cham Province where a large meeting of all the country's *kamaphibal* revolutionary cadres would take place.

At that time, Norodom Sihanouk who had just been overthrown by the Republicans on 18th March 1970 admits in a book that tells—his own version of—the story of the coup which drove him in exile that the "very rapid development of [Cambodian] armed resistance (…) was due to the fact that the [Kingdom] had veteran cadres which had learned irregular warfare in protecting their own lives and their bases from Lon Nol's raiding expeditions"[184]. Marshal Lon Nol, the new head of the State, remained however largely unpopular contrary to the former head of the State. On the other hand, it had been proven that General Lon Nol never gained a foothold in Cambodia's four northeastern provinces. Sara Colm explained that "at the urging of US military advisers, Lon Nol withdrew all Cambodian government forces from the northeast in June 1970, conceding almost one-quarter of the country's land area to the Khmer Rouge at the very beginning of the civil war. Possession of this large swathe of land as an early liberated zone was key to the Khmer Rouge's ultimate victory in 1975. The rebel group gained substantial territory in which to recruit and train a military force and increase their support base among the population. That base grew as the US bombing campaign in northeastern Cambodia (1969-1973) forced the highlanders out of their villages and into the forests, where they lived with the Khmer Rouge".[185]

By the same token the Khmer Rouge were quickly joined by "tens of thousands of what some journalists called "Sihanoukists" who, according to Sihanouk himself, were peasants and townspeople, soldiers, including entire army units which had remained loyal, to him"[186]. With such a new (but temporary) forged-alliance,

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[184] Norodom Sihanouk and Wilfred Burchett (1973), *My war with the C.I.A: Cambodia's fight for Survival*, London, Penguin Books, 272p.

[185] Sara Colm (2009), The Khmer Rouge's Legacy for Highland Culture and Religion in North-eastern Cambodia, *in* Frédéric Bourdier (ed.), p. 142.

[186] Norodom Sihanouk and Wilfred Burchett, *Ibid*. p. 70.

externally supported by Chinese and North Vietnamese governments, the Khmer Rouge could quickly control most of Cambodian provinces. Nothing would now prevent the revolutionary movement from spreading throughout the country, before surrounding and then controlling the capital Phnom Penh in April 1975.

# Chapter 4

## BEHIND THE SCENES

Phi Phuon did not return to his native province until the very beginning of the 2000s. His assorted obligations accompanied by house arrest in Phnom Penh from April 1975 to January 1979, followed by his departure with a large part of the staff of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the north-west of the country towards Malai (bordering Thailand), monopolized his time and energy. It was almost thirty years before he was able to get any news from the International Red Cross about his family back in Ratanakiri. This period of separation, both voluntary and forced, did not mean abandonment. Neither did it imply his being forgotten by his people who, on the contrary, considered the daring Phi Phuon as one of the major local players in a revolution that the indigenous population could have seized upon, in the continuity of the *Issarak* spirit. A revolution that some members of ethnic minorities vainly sought, in part, to appropriate at first by giving it a different meaning from the dramatic turn it took later. A revolt initially justified by the contempt suffered by the "oppressed peoples"[187], but a revolution which over time, from 1970 on, eluded them and which turned ruthlessly against indigenous peoples.

Phi Phuon and his brother, interviewed separately a few months later, remained adamant in this regard. The dynamics of socio-political resistance of ethnic minorities aimed at guaranteeing a minimum of decision-making autonomy as well as better control of their lands preceded the arrival of the Khmer Rouge. The latter took control by diverting the movement from its original course that was intended primarily to free the people of the province from the yoke of international and

[187] A term which often comes up in Viet Minh propaganda.

national colonization. All members of Phi Phuon's extended family I met from 2016 admitted that the indigenous peoples' movement existed from the start without overt interference from the Khmer communists. Early on this movement was subtly accompanied by the Viet Minh, anxious to organize the base and inculcate anti-imperialist ideology, but it was gradually taken over by a Khmer Rouge elite who from 1965 to 1970 knew how to show deference, not only regarding local societies in Ratanakiri but also vis-à-vis the Viet Minh whom, deep down, the Khmer Rouge leaders hated. None of the indigenous peoples, starting with Rocham Tveng, Phi Phuon and including almost all of the individuals I encountered from 1994 to 2017 (former leaders, spokespersons for villages and municipalities, political commissioners trained by the Viet Minh, etc.) could imagine the tragic and murderous turn that the Khmer Rouge regime would take from 1971, the year of radicalization of *Angkar* policy in the northern province.

## Degradation of the local situation

The 1971-1978 period was undoubtedly the most tragic in Ratanakiri's recent history. This is not just a judgment of the present author, but the almost unanimous opinion of those interviewed over the past twenty-five years. A Brao man from Ratanakiri, interviewed in 1999 by Sara Colm alleged, “The Khmer Rouge sought out villagers with the strongest spiritual beliefs to join the revolution first, to get rid of the beliefs. There was a ban on slaughtering cows or buffalos for spirit offerings. The propaganda was that we had to do whatever was necessary to liberate people and abolish classes. When we liberate, we must not believe in tradition or spirit offerings, which were not practical. We gave up practices such as sucking medicinal herbs; gave up jewelry like elephant tusk earrings. We were practicing democracy. We were dressed in black sarongs, black shirts, black trousers - all in black - in order to competitively build our economy and our society. In the beginning we would be poor. In the long run we would progress: we would have enough to eat and enough to save”.[188] Similar narratives told by other highlanders and numerous testimonies of the daily life during the Khmer Rouge regime could be mentioned. The detailed analysis of this thesis describing the continuing pervasiveness of the horrors that unfolded in the three districts of the province merits a separate study. It goes beyond the subject of this book, which is

[188] Sara Colm (2009), The Khmer Rouge’s Legacy on Highland Culture and Religion in Northeastern Cambodia, *in* Frédéric Bourdier (ed.), op. cit. p. 141.

meant, primarily, to retrace the emergence of a revolutionary movement preceding the imposition of the Khmer Rouge model by referring mainly to the biography of Phi Phuon and his relatives as well as to numerous testimonies collected over the long term throughout the province. All the same, it is necessary to briefly trace a few main lines, since by siding with the main leaders who early on implemented a repressive system throughout the province of Ratanakiri, whether he liked it or not, the person concerned, Phi Phuon, contributed in his own way to the establishment of the Khmer Rouge regime.

Ratanakiri became one of the very first large "liberated" areas of the country, followed closely by the vast wooded province of Mondulkiri,[189] also inhabited mostly by other indigenous populations. The neighbouring eastern province of Kratie followed later in 1971, it being understood that the ambiguous term "liberated" here means “liberated by the Khmer Rouge”. It has also meant that those who did not adhere to the Khmer Rouge orthodoxy became like pariahs and, as we shall see later, were liable to be killed at any time.

During this period of radicalization, if civilians had the means and sufficient connections they didn’t hesitate to escape. Traders and administrators close to the government of the old regime left the province towards Steung Treng and the north of Kratie (but soon this province was no longer viable for them). Others adopted a low profile, joining the revolutionaries haphazardly. Many of these individuals and families fell from Charybdis to Scylla and were imprisoned and then massacred by the troops of Khmer Rouge commanders already controlling certain urban and rural areas in neighbouring provinces. The same is true of former indigenous soldiers recruited into the regular army, and who quietly returned to their former innocent occupation of peasants, like the previously mentioned messenger, assigned to go to Phnom Penh. They tried to be forgotten, with differing levels of success. At the beginning of the Khmer Rouge popular siege in 1970, a small number of people, according to the information received[190], were victims of revolutionary vindication,

[189] Sara Colm and Sorya Sim, *Winds from the West: Khmer Rouge Purges in the Highlands of MondulKiri* op. cit.

[190] Testimonies from Tampuan and Brao demobilized in 1978, December 2015. The elimination of the heads of communes and villages (*Mephum* and *Mekhum*) as was systematically practiced in the central plains of Cambodia does not seem to have been carried out on such a scale in Ratanakiri. Rather, according to informants, coercive awareness campaigns and rehabilitation sessions were conducted. On the other hand, no mercy was shown to the men and women who

because they inadvisably came to proclaim their political attachment to the new republican government of Lon Nol. The first work units created were fairly flexible, collective solidarity units (*samaki*), but whose discipline did not take long to solidify, especially after the withdrawal of Viet Minh troops.

It has been said and confirmed by various testimonies that some villagers stayed with the Khmer Rouge from 1965 onwards. At that time, houses were divided into small nuclear families. Among the Tampuan, Kacho'h and Jarai, the nuclear families were generally grouped into matrilineal and matrilocal longhouses. From the end of 1970, the large house in the centre of the village, called *roong* by the Tampuan and Jarai, started to be used for collective meals, twice a day: at midday and in the evening around 6pm, but never in the morning. Women and men worked until midnight. In the morning from 6am to 12pm and in the afternoon from 13pm to 18pm. In the evening, after lunch, they used to raise the dikes, or transplant rice during the rainy season. People remember that they received half a pot of rice for two people (one pot = about one litre) per meal. From time to time, this rice was mixed with yams, potatoes, manioc and bananas. No work meant no food. Couple were at that moment allowed to live together for five days after marriage. Then they have to be separated: each one had to return back to her/his working unit. If there was no battle, soldiers and even sometimes agricultural workers could visit their wife occasionally, but they needed a permission given by the unit leader, which was not always the case. He could refuse without any justification. Children lived with the mother at the military camps if she married with a soldier. Other non-soldier couples did not have this possibility. Every morning, the children of the soldiers were sent to a center for Khmer lessons and for lunch. Parents would pick them up in the evening. In public, ethnic minorities were forced to speak Khmer but the local language was still in use, and allowed to be practiced at home.

The young person went to the rice fields and the old stayed in the swidden field to grow vegetables and cultivate rice. The teenagers formed the mobile forces and were forced to move to where major hydraulic works were being carried out (in the plains of the relatively flat Kun Mum district in particular). Invariably, teenagers and children were separated from their parents. There was a collective house for girls

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refused to give up their animist practices. Any form of religious practice was therefore considered unnecessary, dangerous and harmful. Disobeying meant death.

and one for boys. The only personal belongings allowed were a hammock, a fork, a spoon and a comb. Relationships between young people were severely repressed. If they were caught having an illicit relationship, they had to clear a hectare of forest in addition to their daily chores... At the worst they could be killed. In each village, five or six hectares of forest were systematically burnt to create rice fields. The intention was also to sedentary the populations. However, the system of swidden agriculture continued, albeit at a slower pace, and the fields were moved after two or three years, albeit along the roadside to clear the roads. It was no longer up to the villagers to decide when and where to practice slash-and-burn cultivation.

A new administration created by the Khmer Rouge leaders, who had just left for the south via Mondulkiri Province, was being set up. This remodelled structure did not encounter too many difficulties replacing the one put in place under the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* of Sihanouk, which, moreover, had not been firmly established in the province. Local officials, most often Khmer *kamaphibal*, were assisted by local deputy officials. The network unfolded like a spider's web: each village had to be mobilized and follow the example decreed from above.[191] The popular communes (*sahakor*) were grouped into four to six villages and brought social groups of different ethnic origins together. Everything was done to promote the mixing of populations. The Khmer language was prioritized to the detriment of the local Austronesian and Austro-Asian dialects, although places not directly occupied by people from the plains continued to use Jarai, Kachoh' or Brao. In 1970 the Khmer Rouge did not yet have absolute power and did not control everything, but no counter-revolutionary force arose to counterbalance their ascendency. The socio-territorial system was organized: cadres and sub-cadres enlisted a military contingent, political commissioners, as well as local officials who became members of the popular committee at the level of each *sahakor*. The intervention forces and the *nokorbal*, especially the soldiers, were mainly adolescents or young adults (with a clear majority of single men, even if women were liable to join) from ethnic minorities.[192]

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[191] Sara Colm (2009), The Khmer Rouge's Legacy for Highland Culture and Religion in Northeastern Cambodia, *in* Frédéric Bourdier (ed.), *Development and Dominion*, Bangkok, White Lotus, pp. 141-162.

[192] Obtaining reliable information on the enlistment conditions of ethnic minorities is not obvious. Some information gleaned here and there, to be taken with caution, states that the enlistment, coercive rather than voluntary, took place mainly among young adolescents. Only a few among the new recruits, according to an unrepresentative sample of the population, were over the age of thirty.

However, apart from certain historical elected representatives (the delegation of former speakers, their assistants as well as the men and women who joined the movement from 1965/1967), many inhabitants were worried about the changing situation and did not always know where to turn, still less in whom to confide in view of the intensification of the enrolment in the revolution. What would the future bring and, more specifically for families, how to ensure the protection of their loved ones? The American aerial bombardments increased after the departure of the regular army and continued until 1972 but ended the following year. The Viet Minh withdrew in 1972 following the American-Vietnamese agreement announcing the withdrawal of American troops from their country, isolating local populations, who did not become revolutionaries. Relations between the Khmer Rouge and Vietnamese Communists deteriorated at the same time, and the border region became a minefield with two rebel armies staring at each other. Pol Pot, with his Chinese support, was suspicious of political leaders and the Vietnamese army (as shown by his refusal to comply with the decision-making from Hanoi, his refusal of aid and assistance in all its forms, the closure of borders with the new enemy, and forced evacuation of the Vietnamese population residing in Ratanakiri).

The Khmer Rouge began to cement their power from 1971. They likewise continued to play the Sihanouk card which called on "March 18" (1970) to join the insurgents in overthrowing the republican general of the army Lon Nol and his clique. If, as has been said, the main provincial communist leaders were Khmers, the rest of the Khmer Rouge present in Ratanakiri up to this time (soldiers, party members), that is to say just after the departure of Pol Pot to the south of the country, was mainly made up of people from ethnic minorities and Lao, who again, had no idea of the oppressive character of the regime to come.

In a matter of weeks[193], devastating new orders were transformed into a unilateral program and those who participated in the revolution were summoned to completely reorganize local society. The central leadership no longer accepted socio-cultural and religious histories or traditions. They'd had to be replaced with a new 'rational' behaviour of the revolutionary man. The political activists sent by

[193] Probably after the great *kamaphibal* meeting under the presidency of Pol Pot in Kompong Cham at the end of 1970. Information gathered from a red officer asking for anonymity, July 2016.

the provincial leadership, which was now consolidating itself outside Ratanakiri, were responsible for demonstrating to any revolutionary comrade that the atavistic custom of animist thought which characterized the indigenous populations was a deplorable anti-Marxist attitude which they had to renounce. The rejection of all socio-cultural characteristics was justified by the establishment of a new humanity capable of understanding that, ultimately, a 'stone-spirit' was only a stone and that nothing was gained by communicating with such illusory spirits in order to obtain permission to cultivate a piece of land.

A Brao man testifies that "people were forced to get married collectively. Up to 50 couples at the same time. One chicken was enough for the whole ceremony, which was unbelievable for us villagers. But we had been communicated we were not allowed to have a party, or even to drink rice beer, as we did normally." The Khmer Rouge systematically confiscated the decorative and precious objects owned by the indigenous peoples. Ivory and horn earrings, jewellery, hunting crossbows, gongs and other musical instruments, colourful hand-woven garments made from the cotton grown in the swidden field as well as ritual objects became discredited and worthless. A few people managed to hide their meagre possessions in the forest, with all the risks that entailed. The same Brao man recalls that, at first, Pol Pot's soldiers seemed rather considerate, provided inhabitants showed blind allegiance. "We had no choice but to do as they said. Otherwise they would kill. That is what happened, when we saw some persons disappearing, like all of a sudden, without explanations provided by the Khmer Rouge soldiers and the *kamaphibal*. No mistakes were accepted or forgiven, no questions could be asked that might raise doubts. Such orders called into question any form of solidarity. Inevitably, there was repression, and entire families were massacred because some dared to stand up to the authorities. Then some people decided to run away. All the inhabitants of a Brao village in the Taveng district, not far from the Sé San river, decided to flee after neutralizing the occupiers. This was at the end of 1974. They reached Laos at the beginning of 1975: "We moved very slowly because of the old people and children, as well as all the equipment we were taking with us, mostly food. It took us almost a month to cross the border, before arriving into some Brao villages in Laos, where we were welcomed because they were relatives and we spoke the same language. We stayed there until the end of 1979. Other villages, mostly Jarai, left for Viêt Nam".

The ‘new’ man's behavioural instructions were spreading without delay. As elsewhere in the country, everyone had to dress in black. Families were separated according to gender, religious ceremonies were banned, settlements were grouped into working communities, and many villages were relocated to areas suitable for irrigated rice cultivation. Disciplinary measures quickly reached their climax in all three districts. No one in the community really knew where the guidelines came from. It was as if the inhabitants were summoned to be simple executors of absolute authority, the *Angkar*.[194]

But according to Rocham Tveng, certain popular communes (*Sahakor*) like his, benefiting from more lenient political leaders, did not strictly follow the instructions intended to radically standardize the collectivization of life. Tampuan from the central plateau say the same about the discipline established within their cooperatives: sick people were exempt from working and *kamaphibal* from another ethnic group reduced the working time of adolescents and women.[195] The general trend everywhere else, however, remained relentless. All family movements were abolished and each family household, already divided with the work tasks assigned differentially to each member, was strictly prohibited from collecting non-timber forest products as well as from hunting and fishing for their own use. The revolution had to eliminate so many behaviours that were deemed selfish. Even commonly used and effective medical preparations, but including products deemed useless by the Khmer Rouge intelligentsia, were soon replaced by the widespread use of Chinese medicines and standardized products used indiscriminately such as coconut juice as an infusion, and later as a perfusion.

The days of forced labour began early in the morning, around 6 a.m., and ended 12 hours later. The working day was followed by political meetings that lasted at least until nine o'clock. For example, in Koh Piek (a Kachoh’ village) as well as in Pachorn (a Tampuan village), two frugal meals a day were prepared by old or pregnant women. The first around eleven o'clock and the second around six o'clock. They consisted of a meagre ration of rice, most often replaced by cultivated cassava, varieties of wild cassava, several bamboo shoots and more occasionally water bindweed collected by teams of children in the few small flood plains in proximity

[194] Interviews with families in two Brao villages, November 1994.
[195]Information collected at *Phum* Pachorn (Tampuan village) in O’chum district, January 1995.

to villages.[196] The portion was in some places reduced to rice water with some flowers and plants collected by old people in the surrounding forests. From the age of five or six, children were recruited into small working groups called *krom snoul*, corresponding to a basic unit for a working collective whilst thirteen- and fourteen-year olds were likely to be recruited as soldiers. The most malleable as well as the most dynamic were recruited into the living forces (*chivapol*) supposed to re-educate the problematical supporters of the regime.

Common meals began in 1972, particularly in the northern municipalities of the province (Taveng, Veunsai), with the collectivization of all utensils, except one plate and one spoon per person. Forced marriages did not begin until 1976, with more than seventy simultaneous marriages on a single day.[197] But, such mass weddings were uncommon, unlike other regions of the country, they were not systematically performed. The Tampuan, Kachoh' and Jarai populations cleverly and ingeniously managed to avoid alliances constrained by the *Angkar* by playing on marriage bans between people of the same clan. In the meantime, the Khmer Rouge soldiers and executives of the same ethnicity already knew that such incestuous unions within the same endogamous unit would irreparably cause misfortune in the whole community, including within the *krom snoul*. Many Commissioners born in the province, familiar with these prescriptive kinship rules preferred to leave room for doubt and refrained from forcing such alliances. Perhaps the higher deities, the spirits of the place and the wandering souls of those who had not yet been honoured by a second funeral were all beyond the polpotist stranglehold.

On the other hand, those who, for reasons of health, undernutrition and physical exhaustion, could not work like the others, were accused of being CIA agents, Vietnamese spies or enemies in the pay of the republicans. Behind this accusation lay a ruthless logical consequence which made some members of the ethnic minorities in Ratanakiri - just as it would do some Cambodians inside the country - not just mere political opponents (which is already a crime in itself) but

[196] The villagers nevertheless commemorated the relative abundance of edible foodstuffs in their immediate environment. In addition to the ban deemed totally incomprehensible to collect these different products, if only to be abler to work physically, the elders of Koh Pheak suggested the delivery of a large part of their rice production and other cultivars to other areas of the province (The Khmer Rouge officers contented themselves with saying that *Angkar* had decided to collect a share of the food supply, without further clarification since *Angkar* does not have to justify anything it decided).

[197] Testimony collected by Ben Kiernan, *op. cit*., p. 83.

collaborators of a foreign power, automatically accused of the offense of treason. Betrayal turned out to be the most feared denunciation in those days of patriotic and ultra-nationalist fervour. Again, after cross-checking testimonies from the Tampuan, Jarai, Kachoh', Kreung and Brao, many people accused of unfounded laziness were summarily executed. Such was the fate of individuals thought to be to *Angkar* traitors. Pregnant women in Kaveth, Kreung and Tampuan villages were not spared and suffered the same fate.

Religious ceremonies, so pervasive in the life of forest peasants, were strictly condemned. Anyone, or any family, caught in the act of rituals - even the most trivial - was taken to be re-educated, which amounted to certain death. One of the worst traumas remembered by indigenous civilian populations was that they were subjected to such repression by soldiers and commissioners from the province, sometimes from their neighbourhood, with a similar culture and history to their own. One testimony among so many comes to mind. An old Kachoh' woman, consulted in 1998, said that her most painful memory was seeing young people from her own village side with the mobile forces (*kong chalat*), acting as a local militia, to denounce Kachoh' men and women belonging to other clans having committed the imprudence of leaving on a small hunting expedition at night. What was unbearable for her in this story was that these adolescents turned without any qualms against their blood brothers and their potential brothers-in-law (given that the matrilineal clans are exogamous, therefore providers of men for the women of other clans).

Four detention centres were established in the province, including one near the current capital Ban Lung. They operated at full throttle in 1977 during the major purges resulting from the national laws decreed by the Politburo Standing Committee and which especially affected the then northern region called Eisan[198] by the Khmer Rouge leaders and followers. The first people imprisoned, tortured and eliminated were the Viet Minh Khmers accused of plotting against *Angkar*. In the memory of some survivors, the collective massacres intensified in 1973.[199] In addition to these men trained in Hanoi, the security services of the northern zone of Veunsai as well as those who had jurisdiction over the *khum* living on the Sé San River executed several executives of Lao, Brao and Kachoh' origin. The motives remained the same: accusations of espionage, lack of ideological rigor, insufficient

[198] See Michael Vickery (1984), *op. cit.*

[199] Conversation with Bou Thang (a Tampuan trained in Hanoi), Phnom Penh, March 2011.

work, exaggerated tolerance vis-à-vis the peasant-workers or complicity with individuals seeking to flee the country. Cambodian official statistics of the time, reported by the United Nations Human Rights Office in Phnom Penh, report 3,913 people killed in the province up to 1979.[200] The majority (2253) of them were ethnic and Laotian in origin while the others were Khmer and Chinese, mainly evacuees from towns in neighbouring provinces. On the other hand, estimates extending to unidentified sources indicate a mortality reaching almost half of the total population.[201] These deaths include executions, those in ill health, victims of famine, asthenia and exhaustion as well as suicides.

In order to avoid any temptation of commiseration towards their relatives, the Khmer Rouge soldiers were moved from their original place of residence and were assigned elsewhere. The Tampuan soldiers were sent to territories inhabited by the Kreung, the Brao soldiers went elsewhere among the Jarai and so on. The part of Andoung Pich district where members of Phi Phuon's family lived experienced severe deprivation in terms of individual freedoms as well as diet but this small region enjoyed certain prerogatives, due to its proximity to Viêt Nam and its geographical location far from the decision-making centres of the Khmer Rouge provincial officials. Rocham Tveng, one of these *kamaphibal* responsible for the political education of the inhabitants, continued to barter cattle which he obtained from the Jarai of Pleiku (Viêt Nam). These exchanges were not new. As a teenager, he practiced bartering with the Vietcong coming from the south. The soldiers received salt, sugar, sesame and bananas for their entire troop in exchange for buffaloes and weapons for the villagers. Despite the strict establishment of the Khmer Rouge siege in Ratanakiri, two Jarai continued such strictly prohibited commercial activities. In cahoots with Viet Minh soldiers supposed to guard the border, they managed to get to the other country and bring back by cart (using motorable and therefore easily spotted paths) everyday consumer goods. Religious ceremonies were also not entirely abolished, unlike the rest of the province, which considering the circumstances was an incredible achievement. It even happened that locals continued to play gongs and drink rice beer at funerals. There was,

[200] Kimmo Kiljunen (1984), *Kampuchea: Decade of the Genocide*, London, Zed Books.

[201] Data compiled by Patrick Hughes, representative of Human Rights (United Nations) during the United Nations Transitional Authorities in Cambodia (UNTAC) period in Ratanakiri from 1992 to 1993. Document info provided by Michael Vickery.

therefore, a form of social resistance that took place without the knowledge of the chhlop[202] supposed to denounce such illegal activities by civilians.

Rocham Tveng insisted on the fact that from the establishment of the regime, the survival of a *Phum* was largely conditioned by the negotiating capacity of the political leader of the village in conjunction with the popular commune made up of a few administrators responsible for matters of safety, health, popular hygiene, housing and working arrangements[203]. These negotiating margins were sometimes derisory if not non-existent. Elsewhere they were extremely weak, but everything depended on the personality of the local administrators. The likelihood of a few claims, no matter how benign, coming to fruition lay in the art of showing that they were useful for the progress of the revolution, provided, of course, that the members of the people's committee as well as the soldiers assigned to the commune were not under constant pressure to blindly obey orders from the district.

Benefiting from historic friendly relations with executives who had obtained high positions in the Khmer Rouge hierarchy, Rocham Tveng is said to have managed to convince his *kamaphibal* colleagues, who were old Lao, Kachoh' and Jarai acquaintances, of the need to properly feed the people of his district so that they would be fully able to do the work in the fields as well as for the construction of dikes for the expansion of rice cultivation.[204] Surprisingly, families were even allowed to perform animal sacrifices with pigs and poultry (a way of eating more than usual ...) on the occasion of wedding ceremonies, funerals and even during propitiatory rituals linked to the management of misfortune in the event of an outbreak of illness or misfortune caused by the spirits of the forest. Rocham Tveng smiled as he pointed out that the brutality of certain Khmer Rouge did not succeed in eliminating the forms of reciprocity that indigenous peoples maintained with supernatural entities ...

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[202] The *chhlop* were young children or adolescents trained by village instructors to report what was said inside houses. They were encouraged to hide under houses built on stilts in order to listen to what was being said above. Considered as the children of *Angkar* (the omnipotent and invisible Khmer Rouge mastermind), their mission was to denounce any word or any act, even benign, perceived as going against the regime.

[203] Interview, *Phum* Lom, April 2015

[204] Phi Phuon's brother also claimed that the regime's disasters in some townships were largely caused by zealous local leaders misinterpreting directives from above.

**Against the regime: internal resistance and escape**

Prominent indigenous figures from Ratanakiri opposed the Khmer Rouge. These were men like Bhou Thang, and I will come back to him below with a portion of his biography when he returned in Cambodia. All these 'Khmer Viêt Minh', as they were called, had benefited from a solid political training in northern Viêt Nam.[205] Besides the sources gathered by Vivian Frings, there are no other written sources or reliable accounts of even an approximate number of the non-Khmer ethnic conscripts who volunteered to be hosted by their Vietnamese counterparts. The Viet Minh headquarters were considered more experienced and better versed in the art of guerrilla warfare and command techniques. Most of these men from the highlands—very few of them were women—were to be trained in Communist ideology under the supervision of Vietnamese senior cadres and military veterans based in the northern capital. Sent to Hô Chi Minh's home town at the time, they were destined at the end of their long training to become commissars, military officers and senior officers, political advisors or *kamaphibal*, once back home. Upon their return to the province, with hindsight these executives, native from Ratanakiri and its neighbouring provinces, were able to observe the disturbing turn of events occurring from 1970-1971. Some of these new cadres organized, risking their lives, the flight of villagers to Laos or Viêt Nam, before fleeing themselves, unless they were assassinated before. They were also fully aware that their status as Khmer indoctrinated by the Viet Minh and Viet Cong communists could put them in a

[205] Vietnamese official sources from the Central Commission for External Relations of the Vietnamese Communist Party, quoted by Viviane Frings (*op. cit.),* recall that 1,015 Khmer Viet Minh went to Hanoi for training in 1954. Fifty-two died before 1970 while the others, made up of 963 political cadres, returned to Cambodia between 1970 and 1974 naively confident in the revolution. They got it wrong: 906 of these men were murdered and tortured under the Khmer Rouge regime (accused by Pol Pot and his acolytes of being traitors in the pay of the Viet Minh), and only 57 survived until 1979. Bou Thang, of Tampuan origin, was one of these survivors. He occupied several positions within the central committee and was Minister of Defense in 1981 after the liberation of the country by the Vietnamese. As witnessed by Margareth Slocomb (*op. cit.,* p. 17), everything suggests that the Khmer Rouge regime has never recovered from the loss of these highly trained, experienced and sincerely dedicated executives to the revolutionary cause, but whose entry was brutally forbidden to them. Historian David Chandler is very clear: rather than integrating these capable, and not at all bloodthirsty, men into key positions, the regime preferred to recruit young rural adolescents after a botched indoctrination before giving them full power over a constituency. See David Chandler (1993), *The Tragedy of Cambodian History: Politics, War and Revolution since 1945*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 396 p.

delicate and very dangerous position vis-à-vis the Khmer Rouge who, henceforth, openly adopted anti-Vietnamese behaviour. The almost systematic accusation of these "men who have a Khmer body and a Vietnamese head (or brain)" (*kbal yuon khluon khmer*), according to a formula commonly used by the "pure" Khmer Rouge, led to the extermination of a large majority of the indigenous cadres of Ratanakiri[206] long before the great national purges of 1977-1978.

Bou Thang, of Tampuan origin, and other personalities from the indigenous peoples of the northeast - Mondolkiri, Preah Vihear, Stung Treng, Ratanakiri— who were trained in Hanoi in the 1960s became part of these 'vulnerable' returnees[207]. When Bou Thang returned to Ratanakiri province in the early 1970s, he and his soldiers, recruited in various ethnic villages, confronted and successfully fought off the remaining troops of Lon Nol's small army, whose last main garrison was still based in the small town of Bokeo, in the centre of the interfluvial high plateau[208]. In spite of this triumph, Bou Thang hardly had time to appreciate the flavour of this military victory. The new Khmer Rouge administration, which was rapidly spreading its tentacles throughout the province, was showing worrying signs of radicalization, with labour camps in place, separation of the sexes, segregation of children, working hours, rationed food, while recalcitrant and even apparently ordinary villagers used to disappear, taken away at night and never to return.

As the situation worsened and took a worrying turn, Bou Thang knew that his life was in danger, due to his time spent in Vietnam. Despite this, he decided to stay, anxious to see how the revolution would evolve, naively hoping for a return to a certain stability, imagining an end to the temporary excesses of the *Angkar*. But nothing changed over the months and over the years. Quite the contrary, in fact. As the Khmer Rouge were about to control Phnom Penh early 1975 and seized power, Bou Thang decided to flee to Viêt Nam with three men from the Kachoh' riparian village of Kho Pheak. Bou Thang, fomented with his aide-de-camp, one of the three Kachoh', a rebellion against the *nokorbal* (local security committee) and

[206] Information provided by my former guide and collaborator Kachoh', Pan Van Day, who passed away in August 2015. Besides these data which are probably not exactly correct, they are however not far from the reality and probably closer to the reality than many so-called official estimations that are not always reliable and which therefore deserve to be taken into consideration with caution.

[207] Meeting Bou Thang on three occasions in Phnom Penh in 2010 and 2011.

[208] For more precisions on Bou Thang, see : Ian G. Baird, *Rise of the Brao. Ethnic Minorities in Northeastern Cambodia during Vietnamese Occupation,* op. cit.

the soldiers who assisted this security committee.[209] The men then organized the escape of villagers from the Taveng and neighbouring Veunsai districts who left by taking the difficult paths leading to southern Laos. As far as Bou Thang could recall, between 200 and 500 people (Brao, Kreung, Lao and Kachoh')—women, children and men—managed to escape the Khmer Rouge zone during this operation[210].

More than 40 years later, in 2016, I meet one of the three Kachoh' men who assisted Bou Thang, through my guide Pan Van Day who lives in the same village. The man that I will call Teng, under the guise of a pseudonym, is not very talkative, obviously marked by his past life. Nevertheless, he agrees to talk to me near his small wooden house. He then told me that after accompanying the villagers not very far from the border, he decides to return to his village, where his family awaits him. He tells me that shortly after his return, he was fishing for walleye on the river with another person. A small troop of Khmer Rouge arrived, tasked with keeping the villagers away from the Vietnamese soldiers still present on the border, who risked their lives to make occasional incursions into the north-central part of the province, sometimes on reconnaissance missions, sometimes to help the villagers escape. The two men were arrested, but managed to escape. They walked cautiously. They had to watch out for the mines regularly laid by the Khmer Rouge, intended for both escapees and Vietnamese soldiers. Kachoh' had already fallen victim to these mines laid near and around villages and forest paths. They joined another person, a Brao who was also fleeing, on the road heading east towards the border. After days of walking, mostly at night so as not to be spotted by armed Khmer Rouge troops, they managed to leave Cambodian soil, and after long moments of hesitation, they decided to return to a Vietnamese village whose layout seemed quite similar to that of the Kachoh' and Brao villages. Anxious, exhausted and above all hungry, but unarmed so as not to frighten the locals, the three men were very well received. To his surprise, Teng met some families who belong to the Lammam group, and they spoke the same language as he did. After a short stay, the village chief recommended that he register with the local authorities. Once again well received and not willing to go back to his country, he agreed to join the army of the socialist republic, where he remained for four years. He received a military training in a battalion mostly composed of Vietnamese and

[209] Interview à Phnom Penh, March 2011.

[210] By 1979, the vast majority of these villagers had returned. Only one entire Brao village (*Phum* Tarmir) remained in Vietnam, while two others, also populated by Brao villagers, settled in Laos.

Cambodian Jarai[211]. As soon as the Khmer Rouge were defeated by the Vietnamese army, he returned to Cambodia, initially as a soldier in the army of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. For three months, he fought relentlessly against the still scattered pockets of Khmer Rouge, while worrying about the fate of his family, whom he had not seen for over four years. In fact, his family was holed up with other Koh Pheak inhabitants in the forest, and he only found them after long weeks of doubt and despair. Once reunited with his family and released from his military obligations in the Vietnamese army, he re-enlisted as a soldier in the regular Cambodian army, which at the time was inky weak, poorly organized and made up of men frequently overwhelmed by the torments of the recent past. Later, in the early 1990s, he joined the forces allied to UNTAC and finally settled as a farmer.

Coming back to Kho Pheak, the Kachoh' village, which served as a passage for the fugitives, it finally remained in the hands of the Khmer Rouge but only at the very end of 1974 (a significant exception in Ratanakiri). A few years later, in 1976, once under the control of the *Angkar*, the village security chief decided to wipe out the entire village population because of its past complicity with the fugitives. He forced families to dig graves to receive their own bodies. One of the members of the security council, terrified of what was to come, decided to interfere and alerted a high-ranking official, a more moderate Kreung commander based in a nearby village. At the last moment the commander was able to prevent the massacre. Even in 2019the miraculously spared Kachoh' village still retained the memory of this genocidal attempt.[212] The potential graves dug near a rice field to the north-west of the village, the remains of the collective kitchen as well as the black costumes and sandals worn by peasants, were still visible at this time.

Further east, at the end of 1970, many of the local Jarai joined the Jarai of Viêt Nam. It was not always easy, the border was controlled on both sides and the Viet Minh wanted to ensure the good faith of the refugees. They wanted, at all costs, to avoid the establishment of an ultra-Maoist Khmer Rouge Trojan horse in their country. A scout initially went through the forest avoiding marked paths, crossed the border

[211] For another version of the Highlanders recruited in Viêt Nam during the war, see: Moore, *David* K. (2007), *Tribal soldiers* of *Vietnam*: *the effects of unconventional warfare on* tribal *populations*, Philadelphia, Xlibris, 136 p.

[212] This village, which is that of Pan Van Day, is to my knowledge, the only one in the province to keep this legacy of the Khmer Rouge past.

and contacted Jarai of the same family. Once the link had been established, as was the case for Ta Gna village,[213] passage became possible. Other Jarai villages, in turn, imitated them and took shelter on the other side of the border.

Many other people also chose to escape, most often in a group. Like the small village of Lun, made up of a dozen nuclear families, located on the banks of the Sé San River which took more than a month to reach the province of Attapeu in southern Laos, taking pigs and chickens on the difficult mountainous paths of the evergreen forest that separates the two countries.[214] Brao, Kaveth and Lao joined their kin in Laos through the intertwining of the Hô Chi Minh Trail. A few small groups of about twenty people, in particular Kaveth from the province of Veunsai, took refuge in the heart of the forest of the current Virachey park, and some remained there for more than 15 years (i.e. until the beginning 1990s), deliberately cut off from all contact with the outside world.[215] The number of ethnic minorities fleeing Cambodia (not including the Bunong of Mundolkiri or the Kuy of Preah Vihear) according to Phi Phuon, hovered between 4,000 and 6,000, but such data are only estimates.[216] Another source, revealed by Ben Kiernan[217], reported that 3,000 Brao, Kreung, Lun and Kaveth reached Attapeu Province in Laos, while in the same period about 2,000 Jarai, Kachoh' and Tampuan crossed the Vietnamese border.

## The return of the Viet Minh troops

The Vietnamese army crossed the border without incident and occupied Ratanakiri in December 1978. Jarai, Brao, Kreung and Tampuan refugees who had fled the Pol Pot regime were recruited by Vietnamese troops and joined the military detachments who had come to liberate the country from the Khmer Rouge yoke. 'No-quarter' Brao refugees who returned as soldiers to their homeland[218] once admitted to me that a common ethnicity did not prevent fighters enlisting in Viêt

[213] Interviews, *Phum* Ta Gna, Andong Meas district, January 2014.
[214] Information provided by an ethnic Lun who came back in Cambodia in the early nineties.
[215] Information provided by an ethnic Kaveth from Kok Lak in December 2015.
[216] Phi Phuon, when living in Malai nearby the Thai border at the end of his life, tried to make estimates of his own people (indigenous) who run away for the country, but I had no time to ask him how he managed to do this before he died.
[217] Ben Kiernan, *op. cit.*, p. 86.
[218] Information collected in Taveng district in a Brao village, upper part of the Sé San River, March 2012.

Nam from engaging in fierce manhunts against their pro-Khmer Rouge Brao compatriots. The period of intense combat was quite short, lasting only about a month. The Khmer Rouge infantry suffered a crushing defeat. A large contingent was driven back northeast towards the Dragon' s Tail (while other small Khmer Rouge groups reorganized their forces and dispersed in Steung Treng Province before returning to Preah Vihear Province then Anlong Veng in the province of Oddar Meanchey, which became one of the Khmer Rouge bastions until their ultimate defeat and surrender in 1998). Others headed for Pailin and Malai near the Thai border. Families and relatives of soldiers forced to follow the movement of fleeing troops crossed the country from east to west. Many of the Khmer Rouge soldiers took advantage of the chaos of the general rout to join, alone or with their relatives, the refugee camps located close to the border in Thailand or in Cambodia.[219]

Meanwhile, and here I will end this very brief account of the post-Khmer Rouge period in Ratanakiri, families were reuniting and villages were being rebuilt. Most of the houses were moved from 1971 onwards and the inhabitants, under the benevolent eye of the master of ceremonies, together reinvested in the old abandoned village that had fallen into ruins. It didn't happen all at once. It was necessary to wait a few months, even a year or two before the certainty of the end of the ultra-Maoist dictatorship, but the will to find their social space was stronger than anything. The weapons of war were laid down. Each clan warned the spirits of the place of its impending return by presenting them with offerings prepared by the women and the wise men of the village. Donations were made for the building of the village and the cultivation of new land. The local divinities were asked for mercy for the forced abandonment of the place of life that constituted their social space. A buffalo was sacrificed and its flesh was shared by the whole community. The world that had been divided up to that point once again found itself unified. The rituals that linked the world of humans to the world of other living beings resumed. Families dug up gongs hidden since 1971, the famous gongs that had been silent for an infinite time. The timbre of their chanting addressed to the deities enveloped the ethereal universe. Social life resumed with its cyclical time and its space reinvested with non-humans.

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[219] Christel Thibault (2009), As Free as Possible: The Tampuan Minority, Khmer Rouge Pressure and Border Humanitarian Assistance, *in* Frédéric Bourdier (ed.), *Development and Dominion*, Bangkok, White Lotus, pp. 163-185

The *krom samaki*, or agricultural communities supported by the Vietnamese government, were only established around new, coveted agricultural areas. Unlike other provinces, they represented a small percentage of the general population in Ratanakiri, and membership in the *krom samaki* remained voluntary. The people of the forest preferred to rediscover their family, lineage, clan and village intimacy. They showed, once again, that they remained deeply attached to their immediate environment which, far from being an outer shell, was part of them. And the Khmer Rouge activist, despite remaining nostalgic, had little place in this rediscovered socio-cosmological configuration.

# Chapter 5

# HOMECOMING

## Missing in action

Phi Phuon came back to Ratanakiri 27 years after leaving the province with the future Khmer Rouge leadership in 1970. In the meantime, his mother, tormented by premonitory dreams, feared that he had definitely departed this life. She convinced his father and close relatives to organize a ceremony to ensure that his soul was at rest. Indeed, in the absence of appropriate rituals for the presumed deceased, the soul would have been condemned to wander in an intermediate space between the world of the living and that of deceased ancestors who had arrived at their final destination in the other world. These ceremonies were also aimed to guarantee social peace in the village, knowing that, in order to claim their due, souls not appeased by sacrifices and anointing of bloody rice may have the irascible temptation to return among their own to sow trouble, create suffering, and cause misfortune.

Despite this separation from his family, Phi Phuon often wondered *a posteriori* what happened to them, especially from 1979 when he was warned that suffering, exhaustion, famine and executions which were common in other provinces also occurred in Ratanakiri. From April 1975 to the end of 1978, cut off from the world in his position at the Foreign Ministry he was too far away to do anything. Wanting to know too much was also risky, especially because of the purges among the Khmer Rouge in the northeast in 1977 and 1978.[220] Any attempt to contact party officials from the Eisan region in the north suspected of being from Viêt Nam could be interpreted as evidence of betrayal of the Khmer Rouge regime[221]. He also knew that Ta Mok hated him because of his ethnicity. He learnt from colleagues at the ministry of Foreign Affairs that this intimidating soldier was waiting for the first

[220] See Michael Vickery (1984), *op. cit.*

[221] For the purges in the Northeast, see: Ben Kiernan (1986), *Cambodia: The Eastern Zone Massacres, Columbia University*, Center for the Study of Human Rights, Documentations Series n°1, Part I and II.

whisper of betrayal to eliminate him. The Jarai might feign indifference to the warlord, but still he had to keep a low profile in the Ministry of Defence and not ask questions regarding things going on outside. The years following the Khmer Rouge's withdrawal to the north-west took him even further away geographically, and his promotion to the command of the rebel army made it impossible for any visit which could, at best, be interpreted as a sign of abandonment of his post in a military emergency, and at worst a sign of defection.

**Return**

In August 1997 Phi Phuon received a letter from his older brother Rocham Tveng through the Red Cross telling him that his family in Ratanakiri was alive and well. He left immediately to join them by taking the plane which went from Phnom Penh to Ban Lung, the new provincial capital. This was just after the bloodthirsty events in Phnom Penh in July.[222] He left without his wife, who was a Khmer originally from Kompong Cham Province, but with his maternal aunt, a Jarai who lived in Malai near his home. On his cherished reunion with his family, he learnt of the first funeral ritual organized without his knowledge. His mother urged everyone to perform a ceremony to recall his soul to the living world, otherwise the mortal coil, deprived of its animate substance, risked gradually withering away. Phi Phuon nodding tenderly, took part in the rituals and his mother was definitely reassured. The cosmic Jarai order had been restored.

During his first visit, he took the opportunity to inquire about Jarai living conditions, mostly those of the neighbouring villages, during the Khmer Rouge regime. His brother Rocham Tveng remembered, “Phi Phuon asked about the situation and livelihoods of the grassroots people at that time, as he lost tracks since he positioned with the top ranking officials. He felt dishearten when hearing that villagers and relatives were killed. In fact, he was very concerned because he came to know during his long term exile in Bantey Meachey Province what happened during the Khmer Rouge regime through media, after the Vietnamese Army had discovered in 1979 the *Toul Sleng* custodial centre and the killing fields”. He was dismayed to learn that his own parents and close friends had suffered from many deprivations both physically and psychologically. One of his two parents nearly died

[222] A failed attempt to seize power by a political coalition, including the Khmer Rouge, to overthrow Prime Minister Hun Sen's government.

of an illness without any medical assistance. He learnt that members of his maternal line were killed by Khmer Rouge soldiers of another ethnicity, and that others, of his extended family as well as former companions of his youth, had disappeared without trace, probably massacred by what, during the interview, he called “Khmer Rouge extremists”.

Yet no one in Ratanakiri, it seems, asked him any questions about what he was doing or had done outside the province. Phi Phuon was content to state that he was in the upper echelons of the ministries in Phnom Penh, and that due to the system of compartmentalization of information he had been unable to know what was going on at home. In any case, the people of the district did not blame him for anything. His brother and other family members, that I met in 2015, confirmed this to me. He remained the fearless child who, after following the lead of previous generations, rebelled against social injustice and did everything possible to protect the Jarai and other indigenous societies from outside colonization. He was also the one who believed in the unification of the peoples of Cambodia and fought all his life for it. The abuses of the Khmer Rouge were not his responsibility and, in any case, given his special status as a man responsible for the close security of certain leaders of the regime, like Ieng Sary, he could not have changed anything himself.

Phi Phuon returned to his family three times for important events: the first reunion with extended relatives, soul-recalling ceremony and funeral. He actually returned there much more regularly, endeavouring according to his older brother to return almost every year. He returned in April 2003 to visit his elderly parents who were still alive at the time. His brother, Rocham Tveng, told me about the visits they made together to dispersed relatives; about a pilgrimage to the small pond (*baeng*) located in the family garden and about the ceremonies they joined in the homes of members of their Rocham clan. His mother died in December of that same year, and this time he returned with his wife and children for the second funeral organized a few weeks later. His father died in 2012 and he took part in organizing the funeral. He specified that his mother and father's coffins were made of precious wood, called *tatrao*. The hollowed-out tree trunk is wide, deep and airtight. It is especially used by families of notables and preferentially reserved for the elderly like his paternal grandfather who died in 1965, and who left behind more than twenty grandsons. Such elders fulfilled their social duty during their earthly life (founding a family, perpetuation of the maternal line, contribution to maintaining

cosmic balance, etc.) A second category of wood (*Chheu Krâm*) that can be used is less prestigious, while a third kind of coffin is made of some ordinary wood.[223]

With the memory of the death of his relatives, Phi Phuon, who became a Buddhist by convenience, commemorated the way of understanding death among the Jarai. He recalled that during his adolescence the death of a human being was announced by sounding the large gong[224] in a particular way (rhythm, tonality, vocals) in order to communicate the news. The villagers kept the northwest part of the land outside the village located near the Sé San River to develop the cemetery. The funeral ceremony is first held near the house of the deceased and can last up to five days and nights. The death of an elderly person is a consecration. The gongs resonate, relayed by songs and dances which are not lamentations but evocations of the life spent on earth. A consecration of life, in a way. These evocations prepare for the passage of the soul into the other world. More than three hundred people, according to Phi Phuon's estimate, came to participate in his mother's funeral. Nine buffaloes and more than sixty pigs were sacrificed and the rice beer flowed freely. The same number of buffaloes and forty pigs would be slaughtered for his father's funeral. Members of his mother and father's clan were the first to be invited. People from surrounding villages brought pigs and their own beer jars full of fermented rice husks. Everyone participated in the festivities which culminated with the burial of the mortal remains in the previously dug grave where some of their possessions (clothes, sandal, crossbow, basket, gourd, pen ...) were placed. The coffin, made from a freshly cut, hollowed-out log, was buried over three feet deep.

Offerings are regularly made by the members of the maternal line for a period which may extend up to ten years, when a final ceremony is celebrated. This is the second funeral. This moment marks the final flight of the ancestor's soul into the other world. From this moment on, no ceremony, whether at home or near the cemetery, will ever be performed. The soul of the deceased expects nothing from the living and returns to the world of spirits and gods which it temporarily left

[223] Information collected by Suong Sikhouen, Malai, February 2015.

[224] The series of gongs used for weddings or funerals are not the same. The latter consists of at least twelve pieces of different diameters. The biggest gong sets the pace for the others. When played alone, its tone, both muffled and deep, as well as its rhythm herald important events to be addressed to the community of the living.

during its stay on earth. In 2014 Phi Phuon was invited by one of the Jarai families in Viêt Nam to join in the funeral of a paternal cousin, himself a Viet Minh veteran, during which fifteen buffaloes were sacrificed, indisputable testimony to the notoriety of the person leaving the living world.

I didn't have time to ask Phi Phuon how he felt when he had recently visited his home village. Nor what he planned to do there. One thing we can be sure of is that these moments of return were in his eyes privileged moments, precious and probably too fleeting. He died a few hours before leaving for Andong Meas on the occasion of the Khmer New Year. His body is buried in Malai in Bantey Meanchey Province according to Buddhist standards. About thirty informed relatives came to join the ceremony and don their Jarai costumes for the occasion. But his extended community of Ratanakiri was awaiting the decision of elder brother Rocham Tveng to choose the right time to perform the final rituals in Lom village. The second funeral, by far the most important, had necessarily to take place in the family's place of residence so that his soul could return irretrievably and peacefully to the other world where his father and mother were staying.

**The last trip**

The dates chosen for the second and final funeral was April 8, 9 and 10, 2016, one year after the death of the body before the flight of its spirit. Three days of ceremonies that took place in the wooded cemetery of *Phum* Lom, the village at edge of the Sé San River where his brother, Rocham Tveng, lived. His brother organized the event, contacted the guests and bought three buffaloes for the sacrifices. He procured some pigs which would also be sacrificed. At the same time, most of the guests brought their own contributions, mostly food, intended for consumption during the ceremony. The first day was devoted to the collective preparation of the tomb. The young men of the village got to work with commendable dexterity (sculpture, graphics, decoration ...), while the women participated in the layout of the place, prepared meals for the workers and the few guests already present. The first libations with rice beer took place in the evening a few meters from the already prepared magnificent grave. After dark, the gongs rang out, alternating with Jarai music recorded on iPods connected to gigantic speakers. The women sang songs and danced side by side around the grave. Inside the cenotaph, women of close kinship, all seated, took turns to express the pain of their earthly separation from Phi Phuon. Lamentations and ululations soared

through the canopy surrounding the cemetery. About ten Jarai women and men from Viêt Nam had already arrived and were staying in Rocham Tveng's small house. His sturdy wife was in charge of hospitality. Most of these Vietnamese were relatives, others were Viet Minh veterans from the three highland provinces.

On the morning of the second day, the three buffaloes were brought to the cemetery. They were attached to the east of the tomb. A first animal was sacrificed to apparent general indifference. Children continued to play without paying attention to the kill. The adults went about various occupations here and there and chatted in small groups. Only fifteen participants, constituting the immediate family and seated inside the cenotaph, followed the unfolding ceremony with close attention. The bridle of the slain animal was held by the living. This gesture mimicked the accompaniment of the spirit of Phi Phuon in the underworld. As two men butchered the animal, the gongs sound: the older brother taking the largest gong and chanting the rhythm for the others. The twelve men circled the tomb counter clockwise and the music started playing. The sun had yet to reach its zenith but the chanting gave the impression of it reaching the highest rays heralding a cloudless day. Most of the individuals present at that time were people from the village and the administrative commune of reference. VIPs from other communes arrived in the evening bringing some cash donations, a jar of rice and pigs as an offering. They witnessed the sacrifice of the other two buffaloes the next morning. By no means are such ceremonies a good time to render accounts or discuss the past. Any discussion in this regard is incongruous and unwelcome. Funerals are anchored in the fleeting moment of the present and oriented towards the future.

No Khmer member of Phi Phuon's family residing in Malai (wife, children, maternal relatives) was part of the party, which did not bother the villagers, nor his elder brother, aware that these second funerals do not concern the Khmers, even ones related to the deceased. Like me, many Jarai stayed all night at the site of the festivities: we slept in hammocks, on carpets of collected grass or, sometimes, on the ground. The important thing was to be there. The atmosphere was frivolous: everyone was laughing and joking. Men and women alternated drinking dry-fermented beer with locally distilled rice alcohol. It was indeed a consecration unfolding before my eyes. Rites of death to reassure the living, as French anthropologist Louis Vincent Thomas asserts, or, more prosaically, the closing ceremony announcing the passage from life on earth to life in another ethereal village where ancestors stay as non-human entities. Phi Phuon was off to a good

start *ad vitam æternam* and the living, comforted by the deeds accomplished and the homage paid, no longer had to fear the return of his wandering soul.

Phi Phuon took with him the secrets of his life, the one he started to tell me on a certain day in February 2015. But everything that happened no longer mattered to the villagers: whatever he did and who he was in Phnom Penh. No one after the funeral inquired about what he did and what he thought during the Khmer Rouge regime. He was first and foremost a Jarai and he eventually returned to his own. Thanks to the funeral rituals performed, his soul was not condemned to wander in distant and uncertain places like in Malai, his last place of life.

For the members of his generation he remained the one, coming from a warrior clan, who dared to defy the established order, that of the Khmer oppressor of the Sihanoukist period of the 1960s. He finally found peace thanks to this sweet opportunity to be surrounded by his family, his lineage and his extended relatives, either from Ratanakiri or Viêt Nam, on this final journey into the heart of darkness. The doors of the mythical village located in an imaginary beyond, a frequent object of speculation among indigenous populations, re-open to him.

# EPILOGUE

One of the most painful memories among the populations of Ratanakiri, unanimously evoked among the people I met, was to have seen some of their ethnic compatriots, their lineage brothers, turn against them, acting as henchmen of the repressive order that was killing them.

## An inspiration coming from the indigenous peoples?

As mentioned at the beginning of this book, a number of researchers, historians and Cambodians from the plains thought, and still think, that Pol Pot and his acolytes who went hiding in a resistance movement had forged in the North-East a new idea of the purity of the Khmer race, associated with the purity of the revolution. However, as far as the available documents suggest, the new regime's attachment to the highlanders was based on class struggle, not racial purity. There is nothing in the writings and in the available oral testimonies gathered and collected here and there to corroborate the idea of an inspiration received through contact with the Jarai, Tampuan and other non-Khmer populations. Only a few clues exceptionally gleaned, doomed to remain anecdotal but not revealing. In 1977, the province of Stung Treng, east of Ratanakiri, was described by its leaders as "loyal and good, because it is poor and populated by national minorities"[225].

More recently, the earliest tensions between the royal power and the outlying provinces arose shortly before the Viêt Nam War, following intrusions by the Khmer government, which administratively created the provinces of Ratanakiri and Mundolkiri in 1959 and 1962. The political and somewhat moralistic explanation put forward by the *Sangkum* was to civilize "the unfortunate natives". The Sihanoukist state, little aware of, and even less interested in, the richness of the indigenous peoples' forest management approaches, was mainly driven by

[225] *Le Monde*, 7 June 1996, unsigned article. Typed testimony from Laurence Picq, quoted by Sacha Sher (2004), Le Kampuchéa des Khmers rouges : Essai de compréhension d'une tentative de révolution*, op. cit.*

economic and geostrategic objectives of populating border areas and controlling borders. As early as 1960, settlers came to establish the Preah Sihanouk rubber plantation on the red volcanic lands of Labansiek. Responsibility for the development of Ratanakiri Province had been assumed by the Royal Armed Forces, whose incompetence was briefly highlighted chapter two. They were joined by a group of pioneers made up of retired military personnel over the age of forty and peasants from the overpopulated provinces of Takeo and Svay Rieng located further south in the Kingdom. In 1959-1960, the governor did not hesitate to violently attack the Brao and Tampuan populations in order to deprive them of the land needed for the Labansiek rubber plantation. In 1962, according to the testimony of the French ambassador, the Cambodians indulged in exactions against the inhabitants of Mundolkiri and Ratanakiri, whom they hope convert to Buddhism, the state religion. He went on accusing, "They went so far as to rip off their pendants and injure them, and to deny village chiefs the weapons they needed for self-defense"[226]. In the 1960s, isolated Brao villages were forcibly regrouped by the government on the banks of the Sé San River. Some Tampuan people refused to submit to the work constraints imposed on rubber plantations and in May 1964, three policemen were killed. From May 1964 to January 1965, the Head of State, Norodom Sihanouk, visited the Ratanakiri region which was marked by a succession of incidents. The Prince had seen fit to come with various gifts - fake jewels of all kinds - to ask the inhabitants to stop living dispersed so that the administration could better "protect" them. He returned at the end of January 1968 to personally distribute fabric coupons and sarongs to the population of the villages and the provincial capital which was Lumphat[227]. All these attempts of assimilation were not very successful.

No one can deny, as Sara Colm and Mathieu Guérin point out[228], that the levying of taxes, the confiscation of land to establish the Preah Sihanouk state rubber

[226] Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (France), C.L.V., Cambodge, n°15, politique intérieure, 28 avril 1962, visite dans les Provinces du Nord-Est du Cambodge. Quoted by Sacha Sher (2004), Le Kampuchéa des Khmers rouges : Essai de compréhension d'une tentative de révolution*, op. cit.*

[227] Ben Kiernan (1985), How Pol Pot came to Power*, op. cit.,* pp. 212-215.

[228] Sarah Colm (2009)*,* The Khmer Rouge's Legacy for Highland Culture and Religion in North-eastern Cambodia*, op. cit.,* pp. 150-152; Mathieu Guérin (2009), State Policy toward the Highlanders of Ratanakiri during the French Protectorate, *in* Frédéric Bourdier (ed.), *Development and Dominion. Indigenous Peoples of Cambodia, Vietnam and Laos*, Bangkok, White Lotus, pp. 115-140.

plantation and the hunting down of communists, gave rise to repressive methods that were far from being popular. In many cases, the minority groups eventually returned to the forest world, attracted by Communist rhetoric about fighting the rich, and appreciating the alleged revolutionaries' constant attention to them. Pol Pot, Ieng Sary and even their consorts, considered important people (*neak thom*), were treated with respect, and the wives of Ieng Sary and Son Sen, who didn't appreciate the forest people's way of life, were even occasionally carried around in a hammock. Nevertheless, the upper echelons of the new administrative structure under development resorted to coercion and particular violence to enforce the tasks handed down to the representatives of each village. As mentioned above, at least before the revolutionaries took over Phnom Penh in April 1975, families and sometimes entire villages were killed, not to mention a significant number of villagers from the Province who had already risen up before fleeing to Laos and Viêt Nam.

The question then arises: were the future ultra-Maoist leaders, starting with Pol Pot, Ieng Sary and those who accompanied them to Ratanakiri, really inspired by the way of life of the indigenous peoples? There is not a single evidence to support this hypothesis. To the contrary, in a 1978 statement, Pol Pot described the highlanders as “completely illiterate people who did not have even the slightest idea of cities, automobiles and parliament [but who] dared to fight under the guidance of the Party”.[229] In another instance he said the highlanders were “like beasts under an extremely cruel regime of exploitation … [they] had known only humiliations and contempt”.[230] It wasn't until this meeting that the revolutionaries took into account the peasant structure of Khmer society, that which resides in the plains, by re-educating the peasantry and relying on it to encircle the cities and overthrow a Khmer, Sino-Khmer and Chinese bourgeoisie deemed corrupted by money, power and foreign interference (American, Vietnamese). For the most part, the revolutionaries discovered what they were looking for in the peasants: a simple way of life, a workforce that would hold the country's growth in its hands, and a fighting force against the government they wanted to overthrow. In the minds of

[229] Quinn Kenneth (1989), Explaining the Terror, *in* Karl Jackson (ed.) *Cambodia 1975-1978: Rendez-vous with Death*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 360 p. (Quoted by Sara Colm (2009), The Khmer Rouge’s Legacy for Highland Culture and Religion in North-eastern Cambodia*, op. cit.,* p. 146.

[230] Elizabeth Becker (1986), When the war was over, op. cit., p. 123. Quoted by Sara Colm (2009), The Khmer Rouge’s Legacy for Highland Culture and Religion in North-eastern Cambodia*, op. cit.,* p. 143.

the revolutionaries, the highlanders were not entirely autonomous, since on the other side of the border the Vietnamese had already rallied them before them. At the very least, they had the advantage of ignoring Buddhism and, above all, modern market laws. Ieng Sary told in a seminar in 1976 that the '*Khmer Loeu*' were not trade-oriented and class-hating, though they had been using money, alongside barter, even before the French protectorate and the introduction of piasters, notably via Laotian iron bars.

A somewhat fanciful story was also written to the effect that Pol Pot, who had kept in touch with the Khmer intellectual Keng Vannsak until 1963, might have had in mind the latter's theories on the existence of a primitive pre-Hindu and pre-urban village democracy[231], as well as theories nourished by readings of French orientalists and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Similarly, the idea that the Khmer Rouge revolt was based "on an egalitarian principle inspired by the ethnic societies of north-eastern Cambodia, allegedly described by Marxists and Maoists as 'primitive communism'" is a far-fetched subjective opinion with no realistic theoretical basis nor direct reliable observation.

While it's true that the market economy was introduced relatively recently in the north-eastern provinces, the populations who lived there - and who were bartering or trading in piasters with other peoples at the beginning of the 20th century - cannot be mistaken, as is too often the case, for nomads living in perfect community within an idyllic paradise. They were, and always have been, semi-sedentary, and in some places even quasi-sedentary, as their mobility was limited within a very defined space, subject to the approval of the forest genies and the village council of elders. This was what I have been in position to observe during a long term fieldwork investigation carried out in the mid-1990s in Ratanakiri among various ethnic groups, most notably the Tampuan, the province's majority ethnic group.

It cannot therefore be said, as has been suggested in neighbouring regions of Viêt Nam and Laos, that every individual, apart from a few slaves, had his own field, in the sense of being its absolute owner. In the northern provinces, we have seen that

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[231] Keng Vannsak (1971), *Recherche d'un fonds culturel khmer,* PhD from the University of Paris Sorbonne (Nowadays impossible to get).

the traditional method of cultivation is slash and burn or swidden agriculture, combined with hunting and collecting forest products. The clearing of a plot of land is carried out within territories left in usufruct by ancestors and spirits. And before any clearing, a ceremony is dedicated to them. To put it another way, ethnic minorities do not consider themselves landowners (at least till recently). The land belongs to the forest spirits and is only cultivated for a limited period. Cleared plots are enlarged every year or two, then abandoned after three to five years. The inhabitants will later return to the forest land which belong to the village territory. And outside this territory, the world is populated by supernatural beings that cannot be disturbed without valuable reasons (religious ceremonies, sacrifices, etc.). It is therefore only by force and necessity that villages or parts of villages decide to move, usually due to exceptional circumstances such as intra-village conflicts, persistent infortune and epidemics.

It would be possible to add further arguments against the Khmer Rouge's fascination with ethnic minorities lifestyles and worldviews, but we might as well stop there. It has to be said that the forest peasants were not receptive to most of the revolutionary ideas, once they came into practice. In particular, with regards the organization of work, the community life and the increasing absence of liberty. This is reflected in a statement made by Ieng Sary to Khmer intellectuals re-educated in the Bœng Trabek camp in Phnom Penh in 1978, when he spoke of his first contacts with indigenous peoples: "You have to immerse yourself in the people, mix with the people. I lived with the mountain people and got used to their customs. At first, I was shocked by their primitive way of life, but I thought we shouldn't rush them, shouldn't educate them in our own way. If they don't dress, we can't dress either; if they cut their teeth, we have to cut them too". Ieng Sary later explained that he came up, in phase with some of his acolytes, against the character of some of these populations, which he considered to be rough. This is a far cry from the Rousseauist myth of the "good savage" that had lulled the former Communist militants. In 1974, Ieng Sary confided to a French diplomat that when we came into contact with the peasants in the forest, we had to relearn everything we had learned in Paris[232].

A more solid hypothesis rather than the so-called ethnic fascination of the Khmer Rouge can be explored. Such an interpretation had been corroborated by Koy Thuon who was running the Khmer Rouge underground's northern zone when the

[232] Source: François Ponchaud. Oral presentation at a seminar in Phnom Penh, March 2016.

Viêt Nam war smashed into Cambodia in 1970. After being the in charge of the Khmer Rouge administration in Ratanakiri Province, he was arrested by the *Angkar* and executed in the killing fields in 1977 nearby Phnom Penh. At that time, he rationally and objectively explained why the region was considered a logical place to base the revolution. He kept on saying in his confession that, "The geography of the Northeast Zone is the big foundation; the big asset for us. It has a lot of land—comprising nearly one-fourth of the country—and there are mountains, flood plains, and water flowing everywhere. [From there] we can make war for ten to twenty years. The economy in the northeast is also plentiful. The land is fertile and can grow rice and we can make farms everywhere. Fish and meat are also plentiful enough. We can feed hundreds of thousands of people … So the northeast is a very crucial zone within Cambodia for conducting our long struggle. In fact, when some of the comrades go there they may meet some difficulties [living in the forest], but those difficulties are just temporary".[233]

Thus, far from being fascinated or inspired by the 'Spartan life of these semi-nomadic tribes', as some authors have argued while others still persist to repeat such statements, peasants of the forest rather appeared to the revolutionaries as sedentary semi-mobile inhabitants with relatively close-knit. The location of the province has been far more important than the people who leaved there. One can presume that the future Khmer Rouge leaders perceived the local peoples as they were, without preformatted ideas. Subsequently they initially preferred to blend in with the Highlanders, while embracing their resentment of Cambodian military intrusion, their desire for autonomy, and the panic created by American bombardments. Claiming to improve the living conditions of the villagers, and pretending to restore their pride that had evaporated in the turmoil of successive wars and revolts (with the *Issarak* movement, the Communist indoctrination, the *Sangkum* colonisation, the Viêt Nam war, etc.), they were able to put their principles across by agreeing to concessions. This lasted only for a short time, to some extent until 1970, when the Khmer Rouge ideology, accompanied by a regime

[233] Thuon, Koy (1977), *Secretary of the North Zone, "With Respect to the Beloved and Exalted Organization,"* forced confession from S-21 prison (Toul Seng, Phnom Penh), 15-page handwritten document dated March 4, 1977, translated by Sara Colm and Choeung Pochin. (Quoted by Sara Colm (2009), The Khmer Rouge's Legacy for Highland Culture and Religion in North-eastern Cambodia, *in* Frédéric Bourdier (ed.), op. cit. p. 145).

of terror, came to light. Before any systematic radicalization, whose glimpses nevertheless started to percolate earlier, when the aim was to prevent various forms of opposition, the first task was to gain acceptance. And to seduce. For example, every year the forest peoples suffered from a shortage of salt - the lack of iodine causing goitre - which could not be remedied by the traditional use of squash ashes, or condiments made from amaranth and edible plants or with a compound. The Khmer Rouge introduced a budget to buy salt. They exchanged the salt they bought and stored for rice or black sesame, which satisfactorily solved the salt deficiency problem. In his already mentioned research, Sasha Sher points out that the money was also used to pay Party (*Angkar*) members: 15 riels a day for young recruits, 30 riels for local cadres, and 40 riels for women and girls, who were considered to have made greater sacrifices by abandoning their families. By way of comparison, a worker at the Preah Sihanouk rubber plantation in Labansiek was currently receiving only 30 riels a day as a basic wage in August 1966, and was apparently getting his rice for free. Thanks to the money, the ‘recycled’ farmers, some of whom owned their own plantations, were apparently able to satisfy new needs such as buying bicycles and other basic products. Sacha Sher reports that the Party also developed economic relays, and established a zonal economy. The *Angkar* negotiated with Chinese merchants established in Ratanakiri, until the latter followed the Americans in 1970. Campaigns for rattan and bark were also launched.

While Sihanouk's civil servants only came into contact with the minorities when there was a problem, and the military to crack down on them, the revolutionaries worked alongside them, with the declared aim of showing them the distinction between the "royal" Khmers of the plains and the "revolutionary" A Jarai from O’ Yadao district who joined the revolutionary movement in 1964, was interviewed by Sara Colm in 1996. He explained the affinity between the rebels and the highlanders: “People were very interested in Pol Pot ideology in the beginning. During the Sihanouk regime the civil servants and military worked separately from the people and only came if there was a problem. But the Khmer Rouge worked closely with the people—even if people had less food under the Khmer Rouge, the people were interested in them. We knew the Khmer Rouge wanted to build a

strong society and would change leaders if they did wrong".[234] Sara Colm, also interviewed in 1995 a Tampuan villager from O'Chum district, who had been recruited to join the Khmer Rouge by his schoolteacher who was a Khmer. The Tampuan told Sara Colm that, "The Khmer Rouge had infiltrated the teachers, who told us our country needed communism to develop and become prosperous, to overcome the royalists. I went with *Angkar* because at that time in my village there was no salt, no food to eat. *Angkar* had food, and taught us how to serve our country"[235]. It wasn't until 1970 that the revolutionary administration was given the task of correcting the habits and lifestyles of those they now totally controlled.

## Glimpses of the past

Phi Phuon himself, when he lived in Malai during the eighties, met peasants who gave him a bewildering account of living conditions during the period of Democratic Kampuchea, when the Khmer Rouge controlled the whole country. He was worried about a similar situation in his place of birth. Was his region spared? What happened to his family? Did the people of his hamlet experience the same setbacks? Beyond his personal concerns, he confessed to me that he was concerned by his political commitment which led him to be separated from his family, even if he immediately sought to clear himself of the horrors of the regime. His major embarrassment, which turned into an obsession in the nineties, consisted in not being able to make his own record, at least as regards the village where he grew up as well as the surrounding country which was familiar to him. How many times, he assured me, was he haunted by the image of his decimated village! He admitted to himself of feeling guilty of not having followed the injunction of his mother who had made him promise, shortly before entering the armed struggle, not to forget his family, to continue to visit them and never to cut affective ties, which seal genealogies and matrimonial alliances among the Jarai.

What about the Khmer Rouge grip on local populations? In other words, who were the Khmer Rouge present in Ratanakiri when the regime hardened? In the current state of knowledge, the recruited soldiers and especially the *kamaphibal* of local

[234] Sara Colm (2009), The Khmer Rouge's Legacy for Highland Culture and Religion in North-eastern Cambodia, *in* Frédéric Bourdier (ed.), op. cit. pp. 146-147.
[235] Sara Colm (2009), op. cit. pp. 147.

extraction were far from representing the majority of the provincial population held by the regime from 1970 to 1978. However, everything suggests that the vast majority of soldiers were of ethnic origin. But most of the inhabitants, occasionally deported to other provinces, remained peasants condemned to endure the harshness of the labour camps combined with living conditions of slavery that they were far from anticipating.

As regards the local *kamaphibal*, there is a considerable risk of vaguely asserting that they were legion, but no critical census, that might provide a reliable indication of their numbers, is possible, even the separation between "executioner" and "victim" is sometimes problematic. Not all indoctrinated people, or more precisely partially indoctrinated people, were driven by the same desire to maintain the regime. Testimonies collected by the author of these lines attest to cases of desertion of Khmer Rouge soldiers, but also among *kamaphibal.*[236] This was a reckless and daring attitude because leaving one's post in a rigid administration came at the risk of losing one's life and that of one's family. It cannot be denied, however, that some indigenous peasants took their role seriously and behaved zealously, perhaps themselves terrified by the risks of implacable sanctions which they would incur in case of indolence and *laissez faire.*[237]

It is therefore important to remember that some members of the ethnic minorities subscribed to the dictates of *Angkar*. Survivors—simple villagers/farmers, women and men—of this dark period from 1971 to 1978 have not forgotten an elder brother, a member of an extended family who once shared the same house, or even the quiet neighbour of the same ethnic group, who turned into uncompromising and bloodthirsty brutes. Once again, the absence of quantified data, moreover without qualification, the impossibility of separating "the good guys from the bad guys" means that any attempt at an estimate is doomed to remain hypothetical. The fact remains however, and cannot be denied, of the existence of these collaborators of the regime, just as such men and women are found in all totalitarian regimes of the twenty-first century. Who can completely escape error?

The arrival of the Viet Minh troops in 1979 provided an opportunity to settle scores, most often without any qualms or soul-searching. Brao soldiers enlisted in the

[236] Conversation with a group of Lun and Brao residents, Taveng district, January 1995.
[237] Interview with a Tampuan man residing in Malai, Beantey Meanchey Province, March 2016.

Vietnamese army attacked the Kaveth Khmer Rouge based in their village, as well as their Brao relatives accused of brutality in other villages. The former hunted down and slaughtered those who, according to their own expression, had betrayed their identity as *chunchiet dam piektek.*[238] In the same vein, Jarai and Kachoh' refugees in Viêt Nam were implacable towards the highlanders and their old fellows recruited into the local (*nokorbal*) and regional (*santesok*) militias sustaining the maintenance of the regime of terror in their native village.

There were, however, moments of reconciliation, albeit rare at first. Tampuan and Kreung villages in the south of Bokeo district were lenient towards Khmer Rouge commissioners who had shown tolerance towards the populations under their jurisdiction. Some of these *kamaphibal* took the chance, risking their lives, not to subscribe to the purges which intensified in 1977. Villagers of the commune (*khum*) Aegapiep told me in 1995 that they were authorized, in the greatest secrecy, by political commissioners to raise chickens, pigs and other domestic animals, to collect food and to go hunting on condition that they were accompanied by soldiers. It was the same with *kamaphibal* who let the elderly cultivate gardens in small communities united by family ties. Tolerance was taken to an extreme in the Jarai settlement of Rocham Tveng where religious ceremonies persisted, albeit with a time limit and sporadically, while the institution of forced marriages that prevailed elsewhere in the country was found to be almost non-existent in this remote corner of Ratanakiri.

Locals recalled the efforts of *kamaphibal* to avoid chronic food restrictions. If food rations did not depend on local production as quotas imposed by *Angkar* had to be sent "further", clever strategies could be concocted. This is how the *kamaphibal* Jarai and Kachoh' from the eastern slope of the Andoung Pich district endeavoured—with careful rhetoric so as not to induce suspicion —to limit as much as possible the loading by truck of a large part of the harvest for the granaries of the administration (as was the case everywhere else in the country). Among the strategies successfully deployed, they put forward the argument that the labour force would be more productive if it was properly nourished, the disadvantage of limiting production in the presence of weak or untreated workers, as well as the need for a contingent of robust men near the Vietnamese border.

[238] Interview with Brao families, *Phum* Taveng Leu, March 2012.

**Back to the beginning**

The purpose of this essay, as suggested in the introduction, is not intended to indiscriminately exonerate the indigenous populations of Ratanakiri but to report on the objective conditions which favoured their alignment with Khmer Communist militants from the plains. Educated activists who knew how to hide their motives, seduced the local populations with impunity before attempting - sometimes in vain - to radicalize them to their ideology and their practices. As has been amply demonstrated, any attempt to invoke a cultural tendency, or worse still "written in the genes", of the indigenous peoples to transform themselves into innate supporters of a despotic system of which they were the first to know the worst aspects should definitely be ruled out.

The repeated passages as well as the surveys carried out by us over a long period of time offer a very different version of the socio-political dynamics in which Ratanakiri was the theatre during the sixties: ideological recovery of a diffuse feeling of revolt already present within a large part of the indigenous population, instrumentalization of the role allotted to non-Khmer ethnic groups in the revolutionary process, concealment of the means envisaged for the establishment of the extreme totalitarian regime; cultural ethnocide of the repressive policies of the *Angkar Loeu* and fallacious promises of a better life by abandoning traditions perceived as unnecessary and harmful.

Let us risk a naive question which is too often present in the minds of ordinary Cambodian contemporaries, among certain historians and perhaps among the Boeotian reader. How to explain the rapprochement between radical ideologists and certain forest peasants who supported, at least at the start, the development of the movement? The only common point would seem to be the defiance of all these characters in the face of a political order considered unjust, namely the bankruptcy of the Sihanoukist regime in improving the lot of the countries rural areas, let alone the territories of remote provinces such as Ratanakiri. Two other forms of terror, which were the murderous American intervention from the beginning of the sixties and the waves of repression of the royalist army from 1967 in Ratanakiri only made matters worse and, without a doubt, facilitated the strategy of the Khmer Rouge leaders wishing to impose a new form of political radicalization on as many indigenous people as possible.

But this initial insubordination, as justified as it was, did not inevitably doom such different men to adopt an ideological connivance instilled by ultra-Maoists. Only a few adopted it with conviction, and those who showed any enthusiasm were the exception. More numerous were those who followed the movement without suspecting how it would turn out, and who found it difficult to shed it once the real face of the regime was exposed. Many would have liked to flee, but not everyone had the chance. Those who remained and were enlisted as soldiers, cadres and political commissars had no choice but to adopt the role of simple executors from the start; condemned to obey promptly and without argument or else they and their families would be murdered without any form of trial.

There were courageous demonstrations of resistance, especially from 1970, when the first Khmer Rouge meeting took place in the country, these occurrences, of which only a few are mentioned in this essay, should be enough to defeat the insidious idea of perceiving indigenous people as at best being brave sheep doing whatever was asked of them and not understanding what was going on. Loyalty, so often mentioned to all comers as a characteristic written in the genes of indigenous populations, was quite relative and knew its limits among many opponents during the imposition of absolute dictatorial rule. In addition, 5,000 to 6,000 people left the country (i.e. one eighth of the provincial population) initially, as political refugees bound for the United States of America, and subsequently, for the vast majority, to Viêt Nam and Laos. No member of Cambodia's ethnic minorities was included in the very closed circle of decision-makers or high-ranking officials of the Khmer Rouge from 1970 to 1978 and nothing indicates - both in the few documented sources and in the surveys personal data presented here - a preferential treatment towards them from the moment the *Angkar* regime was installed.

Pol Pot's alleged early affinity with the highlanders apparently never faded despite rarely having been seen in the northeast after 1970, where he probably never went back. Sara Colm went on to say that, “according to his aides one of Pol Pot's final wishes was to have a portion of his ashes spread in the northeast after his death”. It never happened. On the other hand, she kept on saying, “highlanders living in Anlong Veng, a Khmer Rouge-controlled area on Thai-Cambodian border in the 1990s [up to 1998] reported that Pol Pot became very emotional when he met

them there in 1993".[239] Maybe, but this is a very personal interpretation given by a small group of highlanders who followed him possibly by force in this Khmer Rouge-controlled area, and who may have been, once upon a time and like many others, naïve dreamers when they heard a utopian discourse in favour of a 'humanitarian' revolution who will save them, at the very beginning of the arrival of the Khmer Rouge in their native province of Ratanakiri.

Shortly before his death, Pol Pot, in an interview in October 1997 with American journalist Nate Thayer, said he remembered, it seems with emotion, his faithful Jarai friends. This was his period of repentance. He acknowledged the failures of the system due to inexperience in outsourced governance. But he remained firm on the legitimacy of his cause: a merciless struggle against Vietnamese absorption, an egalitarian societal vision and an attempt to revive the greatness of the Angkor empire. Three delusional visions all totally unfulfilled. At the end of 2016, the opportunity arose, during conversations with Jarai of *Phum* Lom, to ask two of his so-called historical "brothers in arms" what they thought of this erstwhile friendship, given their memory, their disillusion and the epidemic of suffering which pulverized their phalanstery. Several words cropped up: betrayal, dismay and humiliation.

Probably, Phi Phuon's elder brother Rocham Tveng and some other revolutionary veterans did not have the same extreme feelings but they nevertheless recognized that something went wrong. First there was an 'unexpected' division between the Viet Minh and the Khmer Rouge army and this divide became detrimental to the Indigenous peoples, mostly those who have been trained in Hanoi and who after a while have been physically eliminated by the *Angkar*. Even some unpretentious indigenous farmers who during a certain period had some affinities and went along with the Khmer Rouge leaders, because they believe the later would enhanced and offer them a better life, soon realized, after 1970, that the Khmer Rouge establishment strengthened its path and converted in a merciless political party. The Regime started suspecting and considering nearly everybody as potential enemies and traitors if the villagers did not obey scrupulously to the new diktats, forcing them to abandon their lifestyles. In other words, they soon realized they have been evicted from the struggle and dispossessed of their own Revolution, as it is claimed in Rocham Tveng's careful testimony that can be read in Annex.

[239] Sara Colm (2009), The Khmer Rouge's Legacy for Highland Culture and Religion in North-eastern Cambodia, *in* Frédéric Bourdier (ed.), op. cit., p. 157.

# ANNEX

## Elements of the Genealogy of Phi Phuon's brother Rocham Tveng

(extract of an interview made and translated
by Mrs Sophea Kong and the author, May 2015)

My name is Rocham Tveng. I am one of the elder brothers of Phi Phuon and I want to talk about some kin relatives (coming from Rocham and Romam clans) and close friends of mine who played a significant role at the beginning of the great rebellion. I call great rebellion not only the insurgency which started in the sixties in our land in Ratanakiri and in Cambodian but the great Revolution that started long time ago in Viêt Nam, against the French, and which extend afterwards in neighbouring countries like Laos and Cambodia. This was a transnational Revolution.

Let me start with my brother-in-law who was also a popular person and an important political figure. His name was Romam Phloun, he was a Jarai and he was born in 1930 in Khaet village, Ta Lao commune in Bokeo district. In 1953, he was given another name that he will keep up to the end of the Revolution. People used to call him *Ta* Lao, because he learnt Lao language. They added *Ta* because he was an experienced and knowledgeable person deserving respect. He could speak and read it fluently. Until 1958, he also learnt Jarai writings to a useable degree. In 1963, he had the possibility to learn Khmer when he was working closely with Khmer comrades [communists]. So he could read and write Khmer. Finally, he became an esteemed and skilful person because he was fluent in three languages: Lao, Khmer and Jarai

In the mid-sixties, the Khmer Revolutionary leaders identified my brother-in-law Romam Phloun as a key person who could influence other inhabitants living in the neighbouring villages. The Khmer Revolutionary leaders need local leaders like him. They said they wanted to liberate all citizens from exploitation and suppress class

division. They keep on telling that everybody should be equal. Romam Phloun cherished this idea. It was not a new idea as it has already been explained clearly by the Viet Minh who used to come discreetly on the indigenous villages. The Khmer Revolutionary leaders wanted to liberate everybody including us, because the royal government has been starting exploiting indigenous peoples with tax collection, military abuse and forced labour. Since they have been arriving in our land, the royal government was creating class divisions. That is why we were willing to have a society without class division and without any nation division [Jarai, Lao…]. Romam Phloun married a Jarai lady called Rocham Pin in 1957. It was very common, even nowadays, that people of the Rocham clan get married with persons of the Romam clan. His wife Rocham Pin gave birth to five children, 3 males and 2 females […]. The first son passed away after birth, but the remaining four, who participated in the Revolution, are still alive. One of the daughters was trained as a medical practitioner and has been affected in a medical team during the Revolution in that area.

In 1963, he became the village chief (*mephum*) of Khaet, and in 1965 he was appointed as village chief in another village called N'gang. Later, in 1968 he became the district chief of Andoung Pich. In 1970 he was appointed as the regional secretary of region 101 which was afterwards renamed region 107. He devoted his life to join the struggle for liberating the nation and the people so that everybody, including in Ratanakiri, could be freed from any invasion. However, in 1977, at the age of 47, he was executed by his communist comrades. At that time, we did not understand why my brother in law was killed by his brothers in arms. How could a committed and faithful revolutionary be eliminated by other revolutionaries?

My father was not a Vietnamese by education, but he sympathized with the Viet Minh who came to help us in Cambodia. They came to extend a movement already going on in Viêt Nam since, I presume, 1951 or 1952. This movement was to fight against the French who were colonizers, and France had also colonized Cambodia. At that time, the King [Prince] Sihanouk was the unique master of Cambodia. During that period, Jarai people were prone to be communist because the Vietnamese taught us why we should participate in the Revolution. Prior to the Viet Minh arrival in our land, we were not knowledgeable and we did not have any political awareness. The Vietnamese Revolutionaries taught us to love each other, to respect each other, and to act in solidarity from one village to another. Prior to the

war with the French in Viêt Nam which came to an end in 1954, the indigenous people knew very little about the Khmer, what they wanted and what they intend to do for or against us. We were so afraid of them because they did not teach us anything and they did not seem interested about us. We were scared of being arrested and detained due to class division, because we did not behave as they expected. However, we were in good acquaintance with the Lao people living in the nearby villages, close to the Sé San River. Three of my uncles went to Viêt Nam in 1955 but one of them died of illness in 1956. They two others stayed with the Vietnamese in Hanoi. They have been invited to learn politics and communism. My two uncles told me that there were many ethnic minorities who have been selected like them to study in Viêt Nam. My elder uncle was tall and he was send to attend engineering school in China, while the second one stayed in Viêt Nam.

At the beginning of the Revolution, before the Khmer Rouge leaders settled in our land, a united front made up of Cambodian indigenous groups, Vietnamese and Lao people was constituted. There was not a single Khmer, due to class division. During the Sihanouk time, years after the Independence in 1953, the members of the united front were trained in Bokeo district, more precisely in Talao commune. Prior to that, we knew nothing of what was going on far from our villages. We did not even know the meaning of development. We have no idea about the life in the cities in Cambodia, we have just been told there were rich people versus poor people. We only knew that the King Sihanouk called us *Khmer Loeu*, which means Khmer highlander) and that he never called us Jarai, Tampuan or Kachoh'.

During that period, the King mobilized a police force with people recruited at the commune level. So the ethnic minorities like us were having two options: either joining the Revolution movement or attending an anti-Revolution movement supported by the King. It created two divisions and some families were having sometime a son pro-communist, and another one anti-communist.

The movement having close ties with Viêt Nam was called Khmer *Issarak*. Among the *Issarak*, there was a known man called Meas[240] who went to study in France. I have been told he was an expert in army management. In Phnom Penh, this *neak*

[240] It was Keo Meas, a communist who became a leading figure in the United *Issarak* Front from 1950 onwards.

*thom* was granted the fifth rank of the Revolutionary army. One time, I do not remember exactly when, my uncle Romam Phloun went to Phnom Penh to bring Meas through Kratie and Mundolkiri Provinces by means of elephant riding. Later, Meas returned via Lumpath and went to live in hiding in the dragon tale area, very close to the Vietnamese border because the royal government wanted to catch him. The struggle in Viêt Nam was attended by Vietnamese but also by Lao and Cambodian peoples—overall all ethnicities mingled with the Vietnamese. I came to know that Khieu Samphan and Nuon Chea [two Khmer Rouge top leaders] never live in this north-eastern region; they lived in the west. Here there was *bang* [uncle] Pol Pot; *bang* Ieng Sary, and *ta* [grandfather] Son Sen who became the chief minister of the Defence during the Khmer Rouge regime. After the period of 1962-1963, a separation arose between Khmer, Vietnamese and Lao groups. The three nationalities became not adversaries, but more independent. If I am not mistaken, Vietnamese were trained in Vietnamese language and Khmer in Khmer language. But still at that time, the Vietnamese who were based in the region were the real leaders.

My grandfather was called Rocham Pa and my grandmother's name was Romam Phot. They had a first son called Uncle Hun who died in Hanoi. After the death of her husband, my grandmother remarried and gave birth to my youngest uncle called Roman Bos. My father was a full time farmer but his stepfather was a supporter of the *Issara*k movement, as well as a worker employed by the French administration. He had a French sword, but I do know where it was hidden; nobody could find it. At the time, when the Japanese fight against the French, I was told that my father served as a village group leader. My father had never been to Viêt Nam for any training but he learnt by himself how to contribute to the Revolution. However, his nephew, Tapang Lao, was directly trained by the Vietnamese. My father was not really part of any Revolutionary group. According to him, it was risky enough: two of his brothers were already members of the *Issarak* movement, and at the same time they were employed by the French administration. One of them whose name was Neouch was very active at the village level for the *Issarak* movement. He used to receive written messages—he could read Lao and Vietnamese—and transmit the contents to other relevant villagers. Being *Issarak* was extremely risky as far as he could not show this openly. The secrecy of the task was needed in order to avoid being identified by the spies send by the royal army,

and some spies could be infiltrated at the village level. It came a moment when he had no choice but to hide in the forest. It was said that the purpose of being *Issarak* was to serve the nation, to fight against those who invaded us and who exploited us. It was a movement that aimed to get rid of any exploitative regime known as 'capitalism'.

I don't know exactly when the *Issarak* movement started, but in the early 1960s the word *Issarak* was abandoned, even by the Vietnamese, and replaced by the word 'Revolution'. The Revolution did not focus anymore on external colonization, even if in fact we were colonized by the Khmer royal government! It aimed at liberating people from the distinction of classes The exploitative urban class was particularly targeted. It was a powerful class having strong acquaintances with the *Sangkum* government. This capitalist class was maintained by very wealthy persons who controlled the rest of the population. Cambodia was rather chaotic at that time.

That is why we needed to prepare and organize our autonomy at the provincial level. Autonomy because we have our own languages, our land, our own way of being together, and we did want to be indiscriminately be absorbed by the Khmers. Indigenous peoples had to create their own army to fight the Khmer oppressor sent by the Prince Sihanouk. We were not totally alone because we were having Vietnamese instructors. Viet Minh soldiers also used to join us, not always, not everywhere, but we knew they were here in case we need them. I made a chronology which is not complete but which provides an idea of the successive leaders we had. First, as far as I can track down, a Jarai from O'yadao region, named Puy, hold a high rank position. He was respected because he had been educated in Hanoi. And before Hanoi, he went to a French school so that he could speak French. His friends called him uncle Pen, because his family name was not known. Pen served the King administration until he decided to join the Cambodian Communist Party. He stayed in Viêt Nam in the 1950s during 5 years and after his return in Ratanakiri he devoted his life to the Revolution. He was denounced and killed by the Royal army commanders. Ta Lao took his place. Ta Lao joined the Vietnamese Revolution until he was executed and tortured by the Lon Nol army in 1963. After, Ta Theoun from O'yadao succeeded him. He was a former *Issarak*. But he was removed because he lacked morality: he was having mistresses. He was replaced by *ta* Tang who was a Tampuan from Bokeo. He also was murdered. Ta Lao became

his successor. He was assisted by some Jarai security guards. At that period, around 1967, the leadership extended and was divided. Further south, in Lumpath [the once upon a time provincial capital] the movement was led by Lao and Tampuan peoples. In Bokeo, the leaders of the movement were Jarai and Tampuan. In Veunsai, the leadership was assumed by Kaveth, Brao, Kreung and Kachoh' persons previously trained by the Vietnamese. Finally, the overall movement was attended by all ethnic minorities. It seems that in each region, a leader, equivalent an ethnic chief, was appointed. The recruited person was expected to have a certain influence, a proper recognition and he had to be a good orator. That is how we managed to successfully attack and defeat from 1968 onwards the Royal army, until they disappeared in 1970. There were some highlanders who have collaborated the American. Most of them have been killed immediately by the Khmer rouge, but some manage to escape for a while. Villagers tried to protect them but there was always a person who did not hesitate to denounce them to the Khmer Rouge security guards who were not Jarai but from another ethnic group. This happened to the grandfather Ching and the grandmother Ying from my commune: they have been killed two years after in 1972. Even the ethnic minorities who had been trained in Hanoi have been executed once it was known they have been trained in Viêt Nam. And that is very unfair because they were skilful and sincere Revolutionaries.

Progressively, our Revolution wanted to be independent from the Vietnamese Revolution. It had to be a real Khmer Revolution. We had to be careful because the government of Viêt Nam wanted to impose his view and expanded his hegemony. Before, there were only documentation in Lao, not in Khmer. That is why I learnt Lao at first. But when the Khmer Revolutionaries decide to go step by step on their own way, they published documents in Khmer. I remember one of the first leaflets that I red in Khmer: it mentioned the existence of Khmer imperialists, who are American followers, American puppets, but who lived in the Khmer land.

Their leaders are Lon Nol, Siri Matak and others [the Republicans who took the power in 1970]. These people were the subject of an absolute Revolutionary criticism and rivalry. The Revolution had to be cautious with regard to some members of the Royal family. Besides we were totally against, and without any concession, the imperialists represented by the Lon Nol subordinates. In 1961, I started to learn Khmer and Jarai and I did not practice anymore Lao. I did not go to

school to study Khmer but I learnt the national language as it was needed to be associated with the Khmer Revolutionaries. I have been working in various areas such as serving in the army, acting as a medical practitioner and being a political commissary and social adviser during the Khmer Rouge administration [1971-1978]. I can almost do everything. But I was not destined to hold any high position; I held only commune and district positions.

Viêt Nam wanted to initiate at the same time a Revolution within three countries—Cambodia, Lao and Viêt Nam—against the Americans who, after France, had invaded Indochina, bombing everywhere and killing civilians and insurgents. If I am not mistaken, if Cambodia had not opened its border to allow the Hô Chi Minh trails going North to South, North Viêt Nam would not have win the war against the South Viêt Nam that was supported by the Americans. The Vietnamese leader Hô chi Minh was in good term with Sihanouk who helped him, first by allowing the deployment of the Vietnamese army along the Viêt Nam - Cambodian border. In the North Viêt Nam, there was a geographical hindrance as it was surrounded by mountains. All the weapons from Soviet Union and China were to be transported to the South for the Viet Cong. Besides weapons, there were food such as rice, fish sauce, salt and other edible products. These weapons were transported days and nights along the border.

In 1970, the King Sihanouk after having left for China was betrayed by Lon Nol. He appealed the people to join the Khmer Rouge to fight against the Lon Nol army. That time we did not have any radio but miraculously we managed to be aware of the call made by Sihanouk through another effective system of communication. It was done by messengers who were assigned in every village at an amount of about 20 to 30 messengers who worked according to their designated times. For instance, the first group of messenger comprising of 3 people would be assigned for a three-day watch and spy from the administrators who worked in the village. The letters were hidden in bamboo tubes placed in *kapa* (the ethnic minority basket). They were hidden because the carrier could risk being killed if he was captured or revealed. There was an agreement upon date and place for secret meetings; thereby there were a great amount of messengers in every village. The language used in the letter was mixed and varied according to the location: Khmer, Tampuan, Lao etc… In 1967, a number of highlanders and Khmers returned from the low lands where they studied Khmer. The teaching in the forest areas which was not available

previously started in 1965. A few schools with teachers became available not before 1967 in the wild. Thanks to that, the Khmer could be taught in some village forests. Therefore, we knew how to read and write Khmer from that time onward. Apart from that, the messengers existed before the arrival of Pol Pot and Ieng Sary. It can be said that it was created even before the *Issarak*. Others, those who stayed at home were assigned to a 'watch duty': when there were strangers or whenever they received any news by some messengers, they will run to the village chief in order to inform him.

At that time, before Pol Pot came, the Viet Minh army cohabited with the Revolutionary groups without any discrimination. Both helped each other, supplying each other with medicines, illness care and food. It was like a 'live and die together' as if they were the same unit. The Viet Minh army supplied us with weapons; some old weapons were given, but not the new weapons. Sometimes highlanders barter secretly weapons with kitchen, potatoes and pigs. The guns were considered 'shared tools'. It was said that they belong to the whole Indochina for expelling the imperialists.

Before two leaders Pol Pot and Ieng Sary came there, they must have been aware of the guerrilla movement already going on in this area. This was all known to them. If not, how could have dared to come here without any guarantee of established protection and surveillance? They paired up with the movement in Viêt Nam, after having both followed the same itinerary: study in France, close relation with Viêt Nam and then with China. They have not been educated in Cambodia. They started accompany the Viet Minh Revolution, but later they separated from them. They wanted to work nationwide. As far as I know, there was an agreement between Hô Chi Minh and King Sihanouk, specifying that Kampuchea Krom would be handed back to Cambodia if the war was to succeed. But Hô Chi Minh died in 1969 before the agreement with the King could be made. This created a negative sentiment against Viêt Nam. And the Khmer rouge were particularly irritated with the changing position of the Vietnamese government.

The Khmer Rouge and the Viet Minh definitely separated in 1973. The Vietnamese army stopped helping the Khmer after the Paris agreement specifying that the American government agree to withdraw its troops from ex-Indochina. Which means also no more bombing. That was why the Viet Minh as well as the Viet Cong

stop helping the Khmer. The Khmer Rouge fought alone from 1973 to 1975, but not in Ratanakiri which was already under their control since 1970. At the that time, Pol Pot and Eng Sary definitely realized that Viêt Nam could not be a right partner for ever. So they became closer to China and China agree to become closer to Cambodia. That was why they supplied weapons and human resources to the Khmer Rouge to fight the Vietnamese army. Probably, China's ambition was to take over Viêt Nam and that was why they supported the Khmer rouge. Myself, during the same year in 1973, I started trafficking cows and buffaloes from Veunsai district to Vietnam, but I stopped this business in 1975 after it was banned. Later, I donated my property to the collective then I got involve in the revolutionary movement. If you want to be a loyal cadre, you need to demonstrate your sincerity and act as a role model to the public.

The problem continued till today and this is a long story; it is not all simple. It was so chaotic at that time, since 1977 till 1978. There was regular fighting, sometimes on a daily basis, even days and nights at the Vietnamese border because Viêt Nam wanted our land. We did not know this before. In 1979, Viêt Nam liberated Cambodia and Viêt Nam controlled Cambodia for more than 20 years. When the Vietnamese troops entered Ratanakiri at the end of 1978 and fought the Khmer Rouge, I was accused because I was a political cadre. But I never commit any wrong things with the people of my area. To the contrary, with my assistants we tried our best for food and medical supplies to be sufficient. Nobody starved there. You can ask people, anybody... I was a vice commune chief, then a district assistant and finally I was promoted as a district governor during the Khmer Rouge regime. Then the Vietnamese army arrived. I knew my past involvement would later affect my future, even if I was mostly in charge of food procurement and distribution in my area. Along with other villagers and family members, I hid in the forest for about 3 months before being caught by them. In fact, I had decided to surrender because I did not felt having doing wrong things against the laypeople. They asked me why you went behind Pol Pot. I turned this question to them by saying that I heard some Vietnamese had followed *Hô Chi Minh* whilst others did not. I could tell that I have followed the ideology of their deceased leader. Anyway I kept on saying that ethnic peoples, whatever their position during the Khmer Rouge regime, did not control the situation. Before 1979, the *Angkar* regulation, ratified by the *neak thom* (big men) based in Phnom Penh, stipulated that the ethnic minority groups were

considered as insufficiently knowledgeable persons, by nature, and that we were quite unlike to hold any responsibilities.

I was imprisoned in a 'Vietnamese cell' in Ratanakiri for 5 years, was located in the provincial capital Ban Lung. The provincial military commanders*, ta Theng* and *Khim Neam,* were also under the arrest I was detained in the same small jail that has been utilized during the Khmer Rouge regime. From time to time, mostly at the beginning, I along with a few reliable prisoners have been requested by Vietnamese soldiers to collect the bones and the skulls of the dead people that were scattered outside the prison. Some bones had been smashed by the flames. One day, I found around five bodies, however I assumed that there were a lot of bones. It was very impressive. That old detention centre was called *Kok O'Kanseng* during the Khmer Rouge and I came to understand that it was not a normal jail but a killing centre. Maybe that is why the Vietnamese soldiers gave the prison another name.

After being released from jail, I served as an interpreter since I can speak Vietnamese. Because I was also a medical practitioner providing injection, I act as a medical assistant wherever I was available. In the past, I was a member of youth groups, a soldier, a medical practitioner, a commune committee member. Instead, I was put to trial by the Vietnamese who previously trained me in the 1960s. I have never been educated anywhere, but I learnt from what I saw. I agree some Khmer Rouge *kamaphibal* abuse power, killed unnecessarily, terrorized the population. They spoiled the Revolution, they blindly followed unjustified orders and maybe they use their position to abuse the others. But I was at all like them. Myself and some of my comrades did try our best for the indigenous peoples to live with dignity and safely, even under difficult circumstances.

It had not been always easy, of course. We had to be careful of the commune spies and the secret agents (*chhlop)*; not only children but also adults, who were hidden under the houses and whose duty was to report and denounce what people discussed to the *angkar.* They were especially under the supervision of the military units*.* Only faithful and reliable persons were chosen by the Angkar to be a *chhlop*. Some communes, at least in Ratanakiri, how to deal and how to manipulate these people wh could cause much arm to the community. Some commune leaders whenever they came to know about what spies had found preferred not to report the matter to the top administration, as they should do. Thus, the repression was not systematic and depended on the leadership and management styles of the

*kamaphibal*. I developed my own strategy: the *chhlop* in my commune were treated nicely, the committee and the villagers were friendly with them. We gave some gifts also! In return, they allowed us preparing local wine, rice and chicken soups. At some occasions, we allowed families to kill buffalo, as a sacrifice, for a wedding or a funeral. The *chhlop* were always invited because on the pretext they were also Jarai, so they had nothing to say. Sometimes the *chhlop* brought us some sweet potatoes or cassava. I also told these young people to watch careful and learn from my performances—flexibility was important if we wanted to fulfill our stomach. In the same vein, if you meet high rankers you must know their language and speak like them. During the regime, I encourage villagers to hide some rice: at least 50 cans (nearly 50 kilogram) in case any incident occurred. None of the spies acknowledge it. At a certain moment, the collective concept so praised by the Khmer Rouge system was not working pretty well in my community. Villagers were facing food shortage—they ate banana trees instead of rice for several days. So I decided to demobilize the collective scheme and introduced individual and family self-help, a kind of ownership system normally banned by the Angkar. It means that people would have sufficient food to eat, provided they work reasonably but not with an infernal cadence as it was supposed to be the norm. Later, I reported this 'unexpected' method to the top officials at the provincial meeting where there were only highlanders invited. Nobody made a comment and I was never blamed.

## CHRONOLOGY

September, 1930: Creation of the First Communist Party (called Dang Cong San Dong Duong) in ex-Indochina by Hô Chi Minh***.

October, 1930: Official inauguration of the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) by Hô Chi Minh and colleagues in Hong Kong. The ICP was formally dissolved in November 1945, but eventually re-emerged in 1951 as the Vietnamese Workers' Party***.

January, 1948: The ICP decides to organize the masses in neighbouring countries Laos and Cambodia to contribute actively to the struggle for national liberation***. Some highlanders from Ratanakiri, mostly Jarai, will join the movement even if a few (like Phi Phuon's relatives) have been previously trained, either as soldiers or militants, in Viêt Nam's highlands****.

June 19, 1950: Creation of the anti-French Issarak armed forces in Sre Ambel (near the China Sea, in present-day Koh Kong Province, southwest of Cambodia) *.

1950s: Many future Khmer Rouge executives and leaders stay in France, including Saloth Sâr (Pol Pot), Ieng Sary, Son Sen, Khieu Samphan, Ieng Thirith, Suong Sikoeun and others**.

1950s: Indigenous Cambodian populations, mainly Jarai, join the Issarak movement and are trained in guerrilla techniques in Viêt Nam****.

1951: Saloth Sâr and Ieng Sary join the French Communist Party **.

June 1951: Creation of the Cambodian Communist Party (CCP)*, also called the Khmer Communist party (KCP)***.

November 9, 1953: Independence of Cambodia **.

May 7, 1954: Defeat of the French by the Hô Chi Minh army at Dien Bien Phu ***.

End of 1954: Cambodian Communists oppose Sihanouk's regime **.

1955-1960: The CCP takes hold in most provinces, including Ratanakiri ****.

July 20, 1962: Pol Pot asserts himself as general secretary of the CCP **.

1959: Creation of the first Hô Chi Minh Trail starting from north Viêt Nam to Laos***.

1962-1963: First American bombardments on the Hô Chi Minh Trail ****.

Beginning of 1963: Phi Phuon joined the indigenous armed resistance group supported by the Viet Minh ***.

End of 1963: Pol Pot and Ieng Sary take for a while the maquis in different places in Viêt Nam, near the Cambodian province of Kompong Cham ****.

Mid-1965: First appearances of Ieng Sary in Ratanakiri ****.

1966: The new radical leadership changed the party's name to 'Communist Party of Kampuchea' (CPK) *** and start to set out on their path to power by staging an uprising against Prince Norodom Sihanouk's neutralist government*****.

Beginning of 1967: Pol Pot moves his base camp (Office100), then in Viêt Nam, to the extreme northeast of Ratanakiri ****.

April 1967: The Cambodian Communist Party is banned by Norodom Sihanouk, following the peasant rebellion of Samlaut in the north western province of Battambang **.

May 1967: After ban of the Cambodian Communist Party, most of the communist members have no choice but to enter in dissidence. Many of them leave the capital Phnom Penh for fear of being arrested, tortured and killed by the security forces. Some high profile members like Nuon Chea will nevertheless stay downtown.

Mid-1967: The royalist soldiers begin the hunt for Cambodian communists in northern provinces, including Ratanakiri ****.

February 1968: Intensification of massacres of suspected Communists in the eastern part of the province ****.

1969: US bombardments intensify in the south and east of the country **.

February 1970: Ratanakiri begins to be administered by the Khmer Rouge ****.

March 18, 1970: Republican *coup d'état* deposes head of state Norodom Sihanouk **.

March 23, 1970: Sihanouk launches a resistance front and allies, in a sudden twist, with the Khmer Rouge **.

April 1970: The Khmer Rouge declare Ratanakiri: the country's "first free zone" ****.

April-May 1970: The future Khmer Rouge leaders leave Ratanakiri, join together in Kompong Cham ****.

October 9, 1970: The Khmer republic is proclaimed, the monarchy is abolished **.

End of 1970: Creation of the first cooperatives, separation of families and ban on religious practices in Ratanakiri ****.

Beginning of 1971: The Khmer Rouge regime hardens, first purges in Ratanakiri ****.

Current 1971: First escapes of indigenous Brao, Kreung, Kaveth and Lao populations to Laos and Viêt Nam****.

1972: Breakdown of relations between the Khmer Rouge and Vietnamese Communists **.

January 27, 1973: Paris Agreement signalling the end of the war in Viêt Nam*.

February 1973: After going out of Ratanakiri****, the remaining Vietnamese troops withdraw definitively Cambodia **.

June 1973: Several Jarai villages of Ratanakiri take refuge in Viêt Nam****.

End of 1973: End of the American bombing in Cambodia **.

April 15, 1975: Capture of the capital Phnom Penh, evacuation of towns, start of the Khmer Rouge regime **.

May 1975: Phi Phuon moved to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs headed by Ieng Sary. He is responsible for the safety of managers and external links****.

October-November 1975: Continuous border conflicts between Khmer Rouge and Viet Minh soldiers ****.

September 27, 1977: Pol Pot appears publicly for the first time as the leader of the *pracheachun* (Cambodian Communist Party) **.

October 1977: Beginning of internal Cambodian organized resistance against the Khmer Rouge, supported by Hanoi *.

1977: Brao, Lun, Jarai and Kachoh' from Ratanikiri, refugees in Viêt Nam, enlist in the Viet Minh army ****.

December 1978: Crushing defeat of the Khmer Rouge in Ratanakiri by the Viet Minh army and his Cambodian supporters ****.

January 7, 1979: Collapse of the Khmer Rouge regime by the Vietnamese army **.

February 1979: Several Khmer Rouge kamaphibal (mostly those working at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs) accompanied by their families, including Phi Phuon, take refuge in Malai in the province of Bantey Meanchey near Thailand ****.

End of 1979: Phi Phuon becomes one of the commanders of the rebel troops in the north-west. He is responsible for the security of the troops ****.

1979-1980: The Khmer Rouge army is reconstituted in the west of the country and in some of the refugee camps ****.

August, 1997: Phi Phuon comes back for the first time since 1970 to his home place in Ratanakiri****.

1998: Death of Pol Pot in Along Veng (Oddar Meanchey) and final surrender of the last hard-core Khmer Rouge. Arrest of the military commander, Ta Mok, who refuses to surrender to the end **.

April, 2016: Death of Phi Phuon in Malai (north-western Cambodia) ****.

April 2017: Second funeral of Phi Phuon in Andong Meas, Ratanakiri ****.

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## GLOSSARY

Angkar: In the literal sense: "the organization". Khmer Rouge direction. Also called “Angkar Loeu”: the high organization.

Angkor Wat: Medieval Khmer Empire (9th-14th century) whose grandeur remains a benchmark under the Khmer Rouge.

APRONUC: United Nations Provisional Authority in Cambodia (1992-1993), responsible for preparing the organization of the first democratic elections.

Bang (pro): Big brother, often a reverent term towards an older person.

Brao: The third numerically dominant ethnic group of Ratanakiri, of Austro-Asian descent. Both the Kreung and the Lun are an offshoot of the Brao.

Chhlop: Young children or adolescents (mostly) of both sex, trained by Khmer Rouge village instructors for reporting to the authorities what was said inside houses.

Chivapol: "Living forces" made up of supporters of the Khmer Rouge Regime.

Chunchiet dam piektek: Indigenous population of Cambodia. This designation is recent and did not spread until 2007/2008.

Eisan: One of the four regions under Democratic Kampuchea, located in the northeast of the country. It was particularly targeted by the great purges of 1977-1978.

Hô Chi Minh Trail: Maze of trails which have been previously hacked out in the forest during the French war in Viêt Nam for guerrilla purposes. With the American threat, the system of trails increased on long distances, while being constantly maintained and developed by thousands of women and men. It crossed three

countries (Viêt Nam, Laos, Cambodia) for the transportation of troops, weapons, and supplies (mostly with the financial and material support from Russia and to a less extent of China) from north Viêt Nam to south.

Jarai: An Austronesian ethnic group residing east of Ratanakiri and, mostly, in the foothills of the Vietnamese highlands.

Kachoh': An ethnic group living in the east of Ratanakiri Province whose linguistic origin is not yet clearly established.

Kaet: Province (administrative territorial division).

Kamaphibal: Revolutionary cadre (civilian or military)

Kampuchea Democratic: Khmer Republic established by the Khmer Rouge (April 1975 - January 1979).

Kaveth: A numerically small ethnic group of Austro-Asian descent residing in the north-central part of the Sé San River.

Khmer Issarak: Independent Khmers (in the 1950s and, to some extent, 1960s).

Khmer Krohom: Khmer Rouge. At the origin, pejorative name given by Norodom Sihanouk to the communist groups.

Khmer Loeu: "Khmers from above". Term invented for assimilation purposes by Norodom Sihanouk, denoting all northern ethnic minorities of the Kingdom.

Khmer Serei: "Free Khmers", non-communist and anti-monarchist Khmers, members of the National Liberation Front created during French colonization by the Cambodian Nationalist Son Ngoc Thanh.

Khmer Viet Minh: Khmer politically trained by Vietnamese Communists, usually in Hanoi.

Khum: Modern administrative grouping, assimilated to a commune, grouping together three to five villages.

Kong Chalat: Young mobile forces.

Kreung: Ethnic group residing west of the inter-riverine area of Ratanakiri.

Krom Samaki: Solidarity group, united in a cooperative.

Krom Snoul: Base group (for a working group).

Lun: Numerically smallest indigenous people in Ratanakiri, residing on the banks of the Sé San River. The Lun are historically close to the Brao, Kreung and Kaveth.

Mekhum: administrative head of a commune (Khum) composed of different villages.

Mephum: administrative head of a village (Phum).

Miir: Area of land cleared for cultivation by removing and burning vegetation.

Mulethan: Ancient people or “based-people”. A majority the indigenous populations of Cambodia were assimilated in this category

Munty: Guerrilla camp hidden in the forest.

Neak Penh Sith: full rights people [Expression equivalent to Neak Moulethan)

Neak Thom: "Great man".

Nokorbal: Public security forces.

People’s Army of Viêt Nam (PAVN): Regular Vietnamese army created after the Geneva Conference in 1954. Still referred by common citizens as the Viet Minh front.

Pathet Lao: Popular name for the revolutionary armed force in Laos who cooperated with the Viet Minh during the Vietnamese war against America. The Laotian Communists took the power in 1975.

Phum: Modern administrative unit corresponding to a village.

Pracheachun: Cambodian Communist Party.

Sahakor: People's commune.

Samaki: Solidarity units created in 1979 by the new Cambodian government, supported for their implementation by the Vietnamese.

Sangkum Reastr Niyum: Popular Socialist community established in 1955 by Prince Norodom Sihanouk.

Sangkum: abbreviation for ‘Sangkum Reastr Niyum’

Santesok: Regional security forces.

Srok: District (administrative unit grouping together several municipalities called Mephum).

Ta: "grandfather". Term addressed out of respect to someone you know.

Tampuan: Ratanakiri's second numerically dominant ethnic group.

Tosu noyobai: Theory of the political struggle and the attack on the Sangkum army. It was developed from 1964 by the Communists who had returned to dissent.

UNTAC: United Nations Transitional Authorities in Cambodia. It was a United Peace-keeping which became operational in the country in 1992/1993 following the Paris Peace Accords of October 1991. Its aim was to restore peace and civil government in a country ruined by decades of civil war and cold war machinations, to hold democratic elections (which took place on 23th May 1993) leading to a new constitution.

Viet Minh: Communist Armed Forces of Viêt Nam Độc lập Đồng minh Hội (League for the Independence of Viêt Nam), created by Hô Chi Minh in 1941 and dissolved in 1951 (being replaced by the Vietnamese Liberation army, and then PAVN) but

whose name continues continue to be used afterwards by the great majority of Vietnamese, Khmer, and indigenous peoples.

Viet Minh Front: in spite of a similar designation which refers to the communist forces, Hô Chi Minh always tried his best to portray the Viet Minh Front as a broad-based movement, armed with a programme that could appeal to all progressive and patriotic forces against the conventional power. Needless to say, the Khmer Rouge leaders never had such a comprehensive and strategic attitude.

Vietcong or Viet Cong: Communist Armed Forces of South Viêt Nam. Initially it was a pejorative name used to describe insurgent forces in South Viêt Nam. The formal name was the People's Liberation Armed Force, or PLAF.

Yuon: Pejorative term used by the Khmers to refer to the Vietnamese.

Photo 1: Negotiation: in the footsteps of history in
one of the last strongholds of the former Khmer Rouge, Malai village,
Bantey Meanchey Province, March 2015.

Photo 2: Lineage of Phi Phuon's mother,
Andong Meas District, early 2000

Photo 3: Rocham Tveng (Phi Phuon's elder brother), Andong Meas District, January 2015.

Photo 4: Swidden land in a Kachoh' settlement, Veunsai District, Ratanakiri Province, June 2017.

Photo 5: Preparing the *miir*, Brao villager,
Taveng District, Ratanakiri Province, June 2017.

Photo 6: Natural source of water in a Tampuan village,
district, Ratanakiri Province, May 2018.

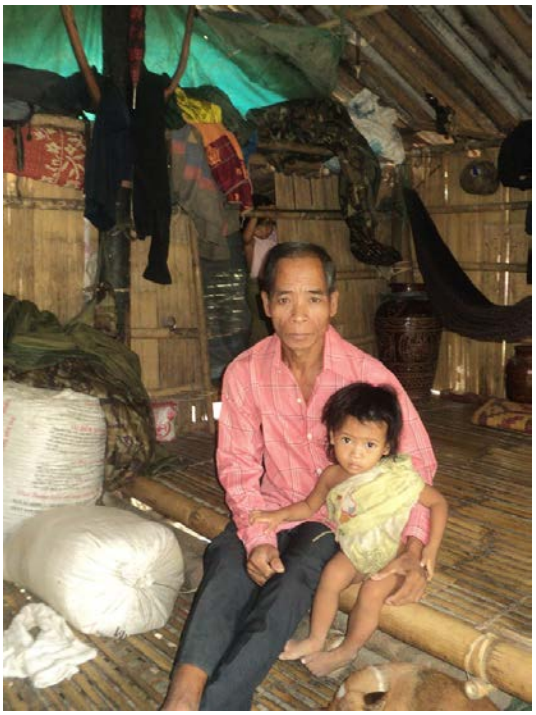

Photo 7: Ethnic Brao from Taveng
forested area, whose family members
have been evacuated in the U.S. in 1970, May 2017.

Photo 8: A former Khmer Rouge messenger, Bokeo
District, Ratanakiri Province, March 2016.

Photo 9: Women preparing ceremonial food
in honour of the deceased (Phi Phuon),
Jarai Lom village, Ratanakiri Province, April 2016.

Photo 10: Construction of the Phi Phuon burial site
in his Jarai village, Ratanakiri Province, April 2016.

Photo 11: Buffalo sacrifice at the funeral of Phi Phuon,
Jarai Lom village, Ratanakiri Province, April 2016.

Photo 12: The burial site of Pol Pot, who died in 1998,
became a National Heritage and place of worship,
Along Veng District, Oddar Meanchey Province, March 2014.

Photo 13: “Survivor”
Brao woman who escaped the Khmer Rouge, Taveng District, June 2017.

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**Time of war, time of revolt among indigenous populations of Cambodia**

Frédéric Bourdier

In the late 1960s, the northern province of Ratanakiri, mostly inhabited by indigenous people, became the scene of bitter confrontation between Prince Norodom Sihanouk's regular army and Cambodian communist dissidents. The ground was not virgin: against the royal power, popular uprisings, supported by north Vietnamese troops hardened in guerrilla warfare, had prepared the ground. The Cambodian guerrillas, future leaders of a terror regime, concealing from the populations of the province their intention to establish a totalitarian regime, skilfully managed to take advantage of these local revolts and gave them a whole new meaning. Ratanakiri became the first territory controlled by the Khmer Rouge in 1970.

Long after the civil war, and once order was restored, the indigenous populations— who were among the first victims of Angkar (the revolutionary ultra-Maoist organization)— have been, arbitrarily, and irresponsibly associated with the Khmer Rouge genocide. Such a misunderstanding is rooted in a denial of history mixed with an insidious form of ethnic xenophobia. To render justice to the indigenous populations of Cambodia and to correct this biased attitude, it is important today that this history be restored. This is what is achieved in this book, following the trajectories of a teenager from the highlands of Ratanakiri, his family and his clan during and before the period of the Khmer Rouge.

*“This book offers a fascinating and revealing overview of the Cambodian genocide and the conflict with Viêt Nam that accompanied and, in part, defined it." (Ben Kiernan, preface)*